

No Discipline: The Post-Punk Polymath

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Lewis Church, 'My Womanly Story: Vaginal Davis in Conversation with Lewis Church', *PAJ* 113, 38 (2016), 80-88.

Abstract

Lydia Lunch, David Wojnarowicz and Vaginal Davis are artists who each produced music, film, literature, performance, visual art and installation whilst participating in the subcultural communities of post-punk. This thesis frames them as post-punk polymaths, artists whose subcultural participation provides a link between their multiple artistic outputs. I position these artists in relation to the historical context of post-punk, and document its influence on both specific examples of their work and their artistic strategies more broadly. My original contribution is of a sustained process of attention to the work of these three artists that negotiates their personal antagonisms towards criticism and resistance to historicisation, the methodological challenge exemplified by their practice, and the critical potential of embracing this difficulty.

Through an account of New York's post-punk scene (the formative artistic environment of both Lunch and Wojnarowicz), I examine the way the material conditions of the subculture provoked an undifferentiated, multi-media practice. I explore Lunch's work through this subcultural context, and the interrelations of her diverse outputs and intentional blurring of art and life in her public persona.

Through the work of David Wojnarowicz, I explore the potential pitfalls of overdetermination, or confined articulations of his practice within popular criticism and academia. My third case study moves away from New York to focus on the work of Los Angeles post-punk artist Vaginal Davis, examining the responsibility subculturally invested artists may have in maintaining their own marginality, through a framing of Davis's practice as self-sabotaging. My thesis therefore highlights the difficulty of rationalising these practices as objects of disciplinarily constituted analysis, the problematic nature of their omission or selective and incomplete engagement, and examines the potential of the term polymath to understand artists whose work fails to map on to the disciplinary remits of academic scholars, genre critics or popular historians.

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Introduction: The Post-Punk Polymath

In November 2016, I attended the opening of *Capital Improvements* at Emalin Gallery in East London, an exhibition of the work of New York-based artist Kembra Pfahler.¹ The night ended with Pfahler screaming along to the sound of fingernails dragged across an amplified blackboard, to the few audience members who had remained until the very end of her performance. In this final moment, the artist was naked apart from thigh-high heeled patent boots and red grease-paint, which was rapidly sweating off under the bright lights of the tiny stage. An enormous black fright wig had been discarded earlier during her set of half-sung monologues, tableau vivants and group actions with her similarly painted and bewigged assistant performers.

Pfahler is an artist who has been active as a producer of music, film, visual art and performance since 1978. This London exhibition was dominated by a plywood representation of the artist's bedroom, lined with images of Pfahler in her trademark coloured body paint and black wig, unnerving children's dolls similarly attired, a short video work, paintings, merchandise for her band 'The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black', and mugs adorned with stills of her sewn-up vagina from her performance in filmmaker Richard Kern's *The Sewing Circle* (1985). A cramped stage was set up in the corner of the gallery, which a varied crowd expectantly assembled

¹ Kembra Pfahler, *Capital Improvements*, 21 November 2016 to 21 December 2016, Emalin Gallery, London, UK.

before on the night of the opening from the advertised start time of six pm. Pfahler was listed as due to perform at around eight.

The space rapidly became filled by friends, fans of her band, members of the established audience for live art in London and other artists, all of whom waited as the expected stage time came and went. As the delay extended past nine and the complementary beer ran out, rumours began to circulate amongst the audience that Pfahler had fallen asleep in her hotel room or was otherwise indisposed, and would not be on stage for hours. Pfahler finally took to the stage at around eleven pm, and proceeded to enact her series of short performative actions: first reciting a poem whilst perched on bowling balls taped to her feet, later performing a handstand whilst a co-performer inserted a large crucifix into her vagina. These actions were referred to by Pfahler throughout as 'performance arts', as in 'here's another performance art for you'.

Pfahler's idiosyncratic use of the term performance art suggests less a governing artistic principle, or claim to a formal identity as a performance artist, than a temporary exercise or momentary endeavour – here is some performance art, here is some music, over there is a painting. Whilst Pfahler may have created what she termed 'performance art' for her opening, her performance was an event that seemed to actually exist somewhere between performance art, the ironic appropriation of cabaret, a set by a post-punk band and particularly anarchic spoken-word poetry, whilst also not being fully accounted for by any of those descriptions. It would certainly be incorrect when examining the breadth of her

output to suggest that she is *only* a performance artist. No one form or medium represents her primary mode of expression or defines her artistic identity.

Pfahler states a commitment to ‘express myself through interdisciplinary art’, and moves peripatetically between mediums and artistic forms whilst refusing to be defined by any one.² This commitment to interdisciplinarity is one that she maintains alongside her stated desire to live ‘an alternative type of lifestyle’, one that has deep roots in the formative environment of her practice: the downtown post-punk New York scene of the late 1970s and 1980s.³ Pfahler’s performance at Emalin gallery usefully encapsulates many of the characteristics I identify in the practices of the artists I explore throughout this thesis. In its unfixed relationship to artistic medium it reflects post-punk’s general commitment to producing new models of practice, embodies a conspiratorial disregard for its audience (making us wait for what will come) and transgresses norms of propriety and taboo in its content and subject matter.

How to engage with this particular combination of interdisciplinary, multimedia artistic production and alternative, subcultural lifestyles is the central research question of this thesis. Throughout I document and examine the activities of artists I frame as ‘polymaths’ emerging from post-punk subcultures, like the post-1978 New York downtown scene in which Pfahler matured as an artist. Drawn from the Greek

² Kembra Pfahler, ‘Press Release and Artist Statement’, Emalin Gallery, <<http://emalin.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Kembra-Pfahler-Press-Release-and-artist-statement.pdf>> [accessed 24 January 2016] (para. 6 of 6).

³ Pfahler (para. 6 of 6).

etymological roots polys (meaning ‘much’) and manthanein (‘to learn’) polymath describes a person who has studied extensively in different areas of interest, or who produces work across delineations of knowledge.⁴ It denotes variety and breadth of skill and intellect, multiple and mutually informed outcomes and production, and a particular mode of unconstrained creative activity.

Through case studies of three artists I identify as post-punk polymaths, Lydia Lunch, David Wojnarowicz and Vaginal Davis (with reference to others like Pfahler) I examine how these artists’ practices refuse and blur formal distinctions between mediums. I also explore the relation of this to the subcultural environment of their development, and the critical potential of seeing their work as indicative of a subcultural investment in post-punk. I will do this through close analysis of individual artworks and the material context of their production, particularly the post-punk scenes of New York and Los Angeles, and historiographical surveys of the limited and often selective analysis afforded them. My thesis is concerned with difficult, uncooperative subjects, artists who all (to varying degrees) sustain and perform an antipathy towards critical analysis, and to a positioning of their practice within disciplinary canons and institutional frameworks. This represents a significant methodological challenge in relation to my three case studies, who are all ‘difficult’ artists to consider within a critical context. As Jennifer Doyle writes in her project on

⁴ ‘Polymath’, *Oxford English Dictionary*, OED Online, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/147212?redirectedFrom=polymath&>> [accessed 13 September 2016].

emotional difficulty, '[u]nderground artists are underground precisely because they work off the disciplinary grid, spatially and conceptually'.⁵

My own analysis illustrates how a polymathic practice emerging from a subcultural environment (post-punk) represents a unique confluence of stated subcultural strategies and critical limitations. I highlight the difficulty of finding ways to discuss these works within the disciplinary formations of the academy that properly accounts for the contexts and multiple nature of their practices, and propose the term 'post-punk polymath' as a useful way of addressing this. I also establish the ways that the strategies of these artists have relevance beyond their existing position within critical narratives, journalistic accounts of cultural significance, and subcultural histories. The contribution that my research makes is therefore twofold: it poses a critical problem, of how to position analysis of these artists, and then engages in sustained examples of that analysis, one that might better take into account the full scope of these artistic and subcultural strategies where they have previously had limited or fragmentary attention.

Post-Punk

My subcultural inquiry is situated in the cultural moment of post-punk, the post-1978 rearticulation of popular culture after the ruptural gestures of punk in 1976-77. It was in this moment, after the first wave of punk artists emerged, that a new

⁵ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 16.

and perhaps more expansive potential for innovation occurred, both within artistic forms (the reinvention of musical genres, new aesthetics of film, etc.) and in the relationship of participants in the subculture to their identity as artists. As Mark Fisher identifies, the post-punk period developed in response to a set of imperatives he identifies as ‘a principle of difference and self-cancellation; a constant orientation towards the new, and a hostility towards the outmoded, the already existent, the familiar’.⁶

This can perhaps be most clearly illustrated by music. Original punk bands such as the Sex Pistols or the Damned had challenged the existing (and to them, staid) aesthetic of popular music in 1976/77 through a regression to a style reminiscent of 1950s and 60s rock and roll, played aggressively and at great speed. Punk, in this short-lived and geographically specific formulation is a generative moment of rupture – an instance where parallel and mutually informed scenes in the US and UK, centred in London and New York, initiated a revaluation of cultural priorities amongst certain demographics of artists and musicians. Whilst the aesthetics and exact disposition of the New York and London scenes varied (although with significant overlap in personnel and inspiration), the main impetus behind the original punk scene in both cities was perceived cultural stagnation and economic disadvantage, necessitating a ‘reset’ or symbolic destruction of what had gone before. The largely symbolic nature of this punk gesture is exemplified by Simon Reynold’s charge that the form was a regressive repurposing of previous musical

⁶ Mark Fisher, ‘Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher in Conversation (2/10/14)’, *Post-Punk Then and Now*, ed. by Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher (London: Repeater, 2016), pp. 8-24 (p. 11).

dynamics. Post-punk bands, by contrast, operated under a conviction that ‘punk had failed because it attempted to overthrow rock’s Old Wave using conventional music’, and that in order to move forward ‘radical content demand[ed] radical form’, as Reynolds writes in *Rip It Up and Start Again* (perhaps the most comprehensive survey of post-punk music published to date).⁷ In this departure from the formal regression of punk then, post-punk musicians attempted to create new and unfamiliar sounds and musical dynamics.

Post-punk bands like Joy Division, Wire and the Pop Group in the UK, and US acts like the Bush Tetras, Ut and ESG pursued a sound that sought the originality Fisher highlights through melodic dissonance, angular rhythms, innovative song structure and instrumentation beyond the standard drums, guitar and bass of a traditional rock band. Post-punk was also characterised by the retention of punk’s original commitment to self-sustained and independent artistic production, often taking the form of a ‘DIY’ approach to making work outside of funding or institutional structures. As Dylan Clark writes of the development of punk, after ‘shedding its dog collars and Union Jacks’ it came to be ‘a position from which to articulate an ideological position without accruing the film of mainstream attention’, suggesting that whilst the aesthetic of post-punk shifted away from a cohesive style, participants maintained an identification with the same subcultural goals of

⁷ Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-punk 1978-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. xix.

distinction and innovation.⁸ The independent, anti-institutional attitude suggested by Clark's observation is evident in the work and attitudes each of my case studies.

Whilst Reynolds refers primarily to music, the broader spectrum of artistic work produced by those invested in the subculture of post-punk shared the same underlying drive towards innovation and originality. Similar aesthetic qualities of aggression, introspection and formal extremity can also be identified in the performance, literature, visual art and film made by artists of the post-punk era. For Fisher, these logistical and aesthetic innovations provoked a 'recombinational delirium' that resulted in an artistic milieu in which 'newness was infinitely available'.⁹ Reynolds argues that when examining post-punk this 'discourse around the work [is] as important as the art objects themselves', a discourse he similarly identifies as one of reinvention and the attempted reformulation of what it means to be an artist.¹⁰

Both Reynolds and Fisher bracket the post-punk period as existing from 1978 to the mid-1980s (for Reynolds, 1984), a period corresponding to significant political and economic changes in Western societies. I largely confine my analysis to artists who emerged and developed their practices during this historical period. Whilst I do consider artworks made by post-punk artists outside of this time frame, I examine in detail the manner in which the ethos and imperatives of the subculture still shaped

⁸ Dylan Clark, 'The Death and Life of Punk', *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), pp. 223-236 (p. 232).

⁹ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014), p. 8.

¹⁰ Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. xxvi.

their production and reception. As Reynolds observes, ‘part of the poignancy of this period of dissident music [and the artistic communities which made it] is its increasingly out of synch relationship with the broader culture’, an important concept for my analysis.¹¹ The articulation through subcultural theory of this disconnect as it relates to the case studies that constitute each chapter is a key aspect of my inquiry. Much of this sociological framing of punk, which I survey in detail in the later part of this introduction, emerges from analysis and characterisation of the first wave of punk bands exemplified by the Sex Pistols, the Damned and the Clash in the UK. As my three case studies are American, and largely created the work I engage with after this first wave had crested, I am careful to acknowledge in my use of sociological subcultural material later debates about its applicability to other contexts. I offset the geographic specificity of this foundational subcultural theory, such as that undertaken by Dick Hebdige and the scholars associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the late 1970s, with extensive contextual framing of my own and significant engagement with later theoretical reflection that moves beyond their UK social paradigm.

My particular interest and focus on post-punk as a context is timely, as it comes at a time of increasing attention to it as a subcultural milieu. The subcultural history of punk and its wide-ranging influence now has an assured position in the histories of popular music, fashion, film, visual art, design and the sociology of youth cultures in the 20th century. Its music is reissued by record labels both major and minor, books

¹¹ Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. xxv.

from both participants in and later observers of the subculture are published regularly by major publishing houses and independent imprints, and analyses of punk culture are offered on varied undergraduate curricula.¹² Anniversaries and remembrances of punk and post-punk have become commonplace, and whilst the subcultures are widely understood to have emerged out of a context of class dysfunction and deprivation in 1970s Britain and America, there is now a booming popular historical industry around punk, post-punk and its participants, that has left many artists and scene figures in the position of a certain level of mainstream fame.¹³ As Reynolds observed in 2005, 'post-punk has become one of the few untapped resources for the retro industry, inspiring a gold-rush frenzy', which still continues apace today.¹⁴

It is therefore an interesting current moment in which to undertake an analysis of post-punk, particularly in the context of debates around the institutionalisation of subcultures previously antagonistic to critical engagement. This tension was seen clearly in the publicity around *Punk.London*, a London-wide program of events commemorating the 40th anniversary of punk in the city. It featured major cultural

¹² See, for example, the course 'Punk Culture: The Aesthetics and Politics of Refusal' offered to undergraduates at Cornell University, <<http://universitycourses.cornell.edu/courses/punk-culture-aesthetics-and-politics-refusal>> [accessed 31 Jan 2017] or the 'Punk Politics' advertising campaign of Reading University, <<http://www.reading.ac.uk/areyouready/are-you-ready-punk-politics.html>> [accessed 31 Jan 2017].

¹³ On television, BBC documentaries like *Punk Britannia* (2012) and *Music for Misfits: The Story of Indie* (2016) document and concretise narratives around the emergence of punk and its subsequent significance. The exhibitions and events of *Punk.London* (referenced below) enact a similar historicisation, as do the wealth of biographies, autobiographies and cultural histories published in recent years. See, for example: Bernard Sumner, *Chapter and Verse: New Order, Joy Division and Me* (London: Corgi, 2015); Brix Start Smith, *The Rise, The Fall and The Rise* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016); and Viv Albertine, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes, Music, Music, Music, Boys, Boys, Boys* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015).

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. xvi.

organisations as its partners, including the Institute for Contemporary Arts, British Film Institute, The Design Museum, The British Library and Museum of London. The backlash against its perceived ideological assimilation of punk reached its culmination when Joe Corr , son of Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood and a consistent detractor of the project, announced he would burn his collection of punk memorabilia (supposedly worth five million pounds) in protest at its ‘mainstream appropriation’.¹⁵

It is important to acknowledge in relation to this debate that, despite the charges of contemporary nostalgia and accelerated institutionalisation, punk and its associated activities have, since their inception, been documented as historically significant cultural phenomena. The exploration of this critical history in relation to the figure of the post-punk polymath, and my three case studies in particular, is in part the project of this thesis. As Zack Furness observes, the question of whether it is acceptable to “‘intellectualize” (the offense of academics) punk is a moot point’ as there is now a forty year history of ‘professors, music journalists and punks themselves’ doing just that.¹⁶ Jayna Brown, Patrick Deer and Tavia Nyong’o suggest in 2013 that a ‘certain patina of respectability has settled around punk at middle

¹⁵ The burning ceremony took place on 26 November 2016 in London to considerable public outcry. See Tim Sommer, ‘Joe Corr ’s Bonfire Stunt Was the Least Punk Protest Ever – and A Hoax’, *Observer*, <<http://observer.com/2016/11/joe-corres-bonfire-stunt-was-the-least-punk-protest-ever-and-a-hoax/>> [accessed 3 May 2017].

¹⁶ Zack Furness, ‘Attempted Education and Righteous Accusations’, in *Punkademics: The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower*, ed. by Zack Furness (New York: Minor Compositions, 2012), pp. 5-24 (p. 16).

age' as a result of this.¹⁷ The continued subversive potential of punk and post-punk might not therefore be entirely apparent in the current moment.

But whilst recognizing the wealth of writing devoted to punk and post-punk, I invoke Roger Sabin's charge that consideration of the subcultures have been 'hamstrung by two things: the narrowness of the frame of reference [...] and the pressures to romanticise (usually equating with seeing punk as a form of nostalgia)'.¹⁸ I suggest, as Sabin does, that the frame of reference for punk and post-punk is often too narrow, and that whilst the influence of punk is examined across varied disciplines within the academy, those artists that are held up as archetypal of both punk and post-punk subcultures (if the two are differentiated at all) are often drawn from a small roster of canonised figures. As Sabin provocatively asks, 'how many more times must we hear the Sex Pistols story?'.¹⁹ Interestingly, these canonised figures like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, or the Ramones, are usually grounded in a particular form of artistic production (music) rather than the multi-media, formally unbound practices of the artists I discuss.

Both the first wave of punk, and the later post-punk artists I focus on, signify a period of immense cultural change, an historical moment of innovation that has shaped the art, music and performance that has come after it. As I demonstrate, however, whilst punk is a revelatory moment, it is not one without precedents or

¹⁷ Jayna Brown, Patrick Deer and Tavia Nyong'o, 'Punk and Its Afterlives', *Social Text*, 31 (2013), 1-11 (p. 1).

¹⁸ Roger Sabin, 'Introduction', *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. by Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1-13 (p. 2).

¹⁹ Sabin, p. 2

more unsuited to scholarly engagement than any other, despite the narratives that emerge around its 'containment' by the academy. Indeed, it is only through close analysis, historical contextualisation and research that punk and post-punk are prevented from becoming a caricature. As Gavin Butt remarked in 2014, 'only now does post-punk seem, as a period, remote enough from our contemporary moment to turn towards it and begin to understand it historically'.²⁰ This historical reevaluation continues, and indeed during the production of this thesis (late 2013 to 2017), the institutional, critical and public recognition of my case studies in some cases has changed, which I discuss and document in greater detail during the individual chapters devoted to each. In relation to punk and post-punk within the academy therefore I, like Furness, 'tend to see punk – like all other cultural phenomena – as a messy but nonetheless fascinating cluster of things that can be analyzed, dissected and debated', rather than a subcultural event without precedent, as my later historical survey of the development of subcultural theory aims to demonstrate.²¹

Scholarly interrogation and historical contextualisation like mine can ensure that a fuller multiplicity of activities endure, rather than the most archetypal, the most able to be accommodated into already existing structures of analysis, the most archivable, or the most profitable. I am addressing these concerns, most particularly the narratives built up around the subculture's significance, and the narrow roster of artists that make up the existing histories of punk and post-punk that Sabin refers

²⁰ Gavin Butt, in 'Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher in Conversation (2/10/14)', *Post-Punk Then and Now*, p. 9. Emphasis in original.

²¹ Furness, pp. 11-12.

to. Like Brown, Deer and Nyong'o, I 'seek to disrupt linear histories of punk [and post-punk] [...] by recognizing the unruly profligacy of its meanings both within music and popular culture, and outside and beyond genre'.²² I argue that it is actually only after its original period of cultural significance has ended that punk and what came after can begin to be understood beyond nostalgia and mythology, and that is useful to reaffirm and continue to explore the value of the subculture as a context for diverse instances of artistic production.

The Polymath

I articulate the formally varied artistic activity undertaken by the artists that make up my case studies through the concept of the polymath, which is a term with a complicated relationship to artistic analysis. Within an art historical context, the polymath is most evocative of a Renaissance ideal of intellectual curiosity, particularly in relation to fifteenth and sixteenth century figures like Michelangelo, Galileo, and especially Leonardo da Vinci, 'the ultimate polymath'.²³ The somewhat archaic nature of the term might therefore seem incongruous with my interest in post-punk. Indeed, the subculture's disavowal of intrinsic talent and virtuosity as concepts important to artistic production appear almost antithetical to the polymath's notional associations with genius and the 'great men' of the European Renaissance. Yet I have chosen to use the term throughout my thesis for very deliberate reasons. It offers a more expansive definition of the artist's practices than

²² Brown, Deer and Nyong'o, p. 2.

²³ Michael White, *Leonardo: The First Scientist* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), p. 7.

‘intermedial’ or ‘multimedia’, and mobilises the assertive connotations of the term in advocacy of their importance.

As Amy Spencer writes of punk, part of the essential character of its emergence was that there was no ‘sense of mystery in what [punks] were doing, this was simple and straightforward and anyone could do it’.²⁴ Post-punk was similarly an ‘amateurist and autodidactic project’, according to Kodwo Eshun.²⁵ These characterisations of the movement and the artists within it are certainly far removed from the kind of valorisation undertaken by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), the contemporaneous biographer of the Renaissance polymaths referenced above, who describes Leonardo as an artist displaying ‘infinite grace in everything he did and who cultivated his genius so brilliantly that all problems he studied he solved with ease. [...] he was a man of regal spirit and tremendous breadth of mind’.²⁶

What Vasari idealises as a unique ‘breadth of mind’ is a practice that is able to work across forms and media, and to unify seemingly disparate activities into a single process of investigation and expression. What this ascription of genius offers, as described by Marjorie Garber, is a characterisation of their practice linked to ‘the unpredictable and inventive capacities of creative work, uncharted, unbounded,

²⁴ Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* (London And New York: Marion Boyars, 2015), p. 229.

²⁵ Kodwo Eshun in ‘Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher in Conversation (2/10/14)’, *Post-Punk Then and Now*, p. 12.

²⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists: Volume 1*, trans. by George Bull (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 255.

both intuitive and counterintuitive'.²⁷ As Garber's description suggests, a practice labelled 'polymathic' (which ranges across forms and techniques, artistic identities and between science, art and politics) can be identified with a critically potent artistic identity unburdened by concerns of formal correctness.

For my three case studies – Lydia Lunch, David Wojnarowicz and Vaginal Davis – the concept of working within defined prescriptions of artistic practice existed no more than did the division between their art and life. The lack of adequate language to engage with these artists critically is a primary concern, and I use the term 'polymath' advisedly to argue for the importance of the activities of those who lack an easily discernible relationship to formal criteria of artistic analysis. The rationale for their practices is reliant on the unbounded nature of creativity identified by Garber, something that neither qualified attribution ('sometime painter') or any list of multiple activities (musician, writer, photographer, etc.) is able to embody. I also enjoy the notion of considering these artists to be polymaths, of placing them within a lineage of figures emerging from a Renaissance ideal of working across mediums and separate areas of knowledge. I am expanding the term from a list of historical 'great men' patronised by nobility and church, to a conception that includes artists of a subculture devoted to a dissolution of cultural hierarchies and a disavowal of skill and formal correctness, one built upon a notion of radical subversion and resistance to the status quo. The case studies of my thesis depart markedly from the 'great men' regularly deemed polymaths in multiple ways, but most obviously in

²⁷ Marjorie Garber, *Patronizing the Arts* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 164.

their gender (or gender fluidity), race, sexual identity, class, education and access to economic capital.

My use of the term polymath is not, however, an attempt to recuperate the mythological status of the genius, but rather engage in a strategic deployment of language to connect a history of diverse artistic production to a set of more contemporary practices. Georges Didi-Huberman contends that Vasari's first goal was to 'to save artists from their supposed "second death", to render art unforgettable', and I aim to similarly draw attention to artists deeply influential within their original subcultural milieu but perhaps susceptible to being missed, minimised or written out of the histories of those subcultures, or from those of art and performance more broadly.²⁸ I have no interest in conferring the status of genius on my chosen case studies, as the problematic nature of that description as an exclusionary and marginalising conception that privileges the same series of historical white men is well documented. As feminist art historian Griselda Pollock suggests, redressing the marginalisation provoked by the label of genius requires a dual approach:

First the practice must be located as part of the social struggles between classes, races and genders, articulating with other sites of representation.

²⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. by John Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 62.

But second we must analyse what any specific practice is doing, what meaning is being produced and how and for whom.²⁹

Rather than reproduce the problematic model of the genius then, throughout this thesis I will endeavour to undertake the dual articulation of artists' critical significance and/or political resonance, whilst also providing a detailed engagement with what their practice is and does; how it operates within the contextual logic of its production as well as its aesthetic, content and subject matter.

The term 'polymath', whilst imperfect, suggests an artistic identity that is *constituted* through variety, that is formed through multi-media production rather than arriving at it incidentally. Referring to my case studies as polymaths, and their practices as polymathic, asserts that their diverse output is not merely the result of being unfocused or personally undisciplined in a pejorative sense. The positive historical connotations of worthwhile, multi-faceted endeavour in relation to artists who have previously been overlooked, marginalised or have limited profile within critical frameworks fundamentally rejects any charge of dilettantism: superficial and flippant dabbling in several forms supplementary to a primary focus of expertise. It reinforces my argument concerning the deliberate and invested nature of their polymathy, and that their refusal to accept a single definition of their artistic identity is worthy of serious analysis precisely as a subcultural strategy.

²⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 9-10.

Structure

This introduction sets out my key frameworks of analysis, and establishes the terms I use throughout. I have already explained my use of polymath to refer to the post-punk artists I discuss, and I go on to explain the relevance of intermediality, interdisciplinarity, and historiography to my project below. Later, I devote significant space to a literature review and discussion of subcultural theory, charting its development as a concept emerging from sociological study. This grounds my later discussion of post-punk as a subculture, and articulates how the cultural output of a given subculture reflects social factors in both its 'parent' culture and the wider 'dominant' culture, whilst serving to constitute its participants through a model of distinction. This distinction (and its related model, opposition) is key for my later discussion of specific artistic communities and their relationship to social, cultural and economic factors.

Each chapter of my thesis is built around a case study of a single artist, and a particular aspect of what I understand as post-punk polymathy. In Chapter One I focus on the work of Lydia Lunch, the self-styled provocateur of the No Wave post-punk sub-genre and uncompromising artist in multiple mediums. I establish her as a primary example of the post-punk polymath on New York's Lower East Side and identify the way that her investment in a polymathic practice that blurs art and life has in great part left her critically isolated and selectively discussed. This includes an analysis of selected examples of her work within the context of the Lower East Side and in relation to her own attitudes and strategies in relation to criticism and the

academy. I also demonstrate the importance of post-punk as a generative context for polymathic artistic practice through an examination of the New York post-punk scene from its emergence in late 1977 and into the 1980s. I achieve this through a discussion of the wider manner in which its unique cultural and economic dynamics provoked the practice of multiple outputs that I identify as polymathic, and how they relate to Lunch's purposeful blurring of art and life.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the artist David Wojnarowicz in terms of his practice's relevance to post-punk in New York, and the significance of the subculture in the development of his work. I also discuss how a selective recognition of certain aspects or readings of a polymath's practice might come to define the critical identity of an artist, and so constrain the ways they are then written about in both the wider media and scholarly research. I pay particular attention to the way in which the recognition of Wojnarowicz's vital activism and political artwork during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s has complicated academic analysis and public recognition of work not immediately related to this crisis and political dimension.

Rather than diminishing the importance of the AIDS crisis to Wojnarowicz's activism and his artistic production, my analysis questions whether media scandal and censorship battles have obscured his also important connections to other artistic scenes, subcultural milieus and aesthetic vocabularies. In particular, I ask whether the media scandal around the removal of his work *A Fire in My Belly* (1986-87) from the National Portrait Gallery in 2010 and the retrospective and largely inaccurate

reading of the film as 'about' AIDS has obscured its connection to the Cinema of Transgression (an anarchic and cartoonishly subversive film movement Lunch was also involved with) and Wojnarowicz's particular reading of Mexico as a mythic landscape of escape from the limitations of the USA.

The shared context of the Lower East Side post-punk environment links the two case studies of Wojnarowicz and Lunch, allowing comparison between their respective critical positions, disciplinary canonisation and popular notoriety. Chapter Three shifts from New York's Lower East Side to the post-punk scene of Los Angeles and the polymathic work of Vaginal Davis, an artist important in the development of the post-punk sub-genre Queercore (also called Homocore) through her performances, music, zines and 'terrorist drag' aesthetic. Through Davis I engage with the roles artists themselves play in the marginalisation of their work, and their desire to not be included within academic or other critical discourse.

I explore a model of 'self-sabotage' in relation to Davis's 2011 performance *Memory Island* at Tate Modern in London, and the historical precedents set by the attitudes and strategies expressed and pursued in the artist's previous work. This chapter also interrogates the role of the critical writer in relation to this self-sabotage, and as an advocate of the practices of certain artists that they may have a personal connection or identification with. Finally, my conclusion reaffirms the goals and strategies of this thesis, and suggests further avenues for an expansion of these research strategies and other applications for my methodology.

Scope

Both my case studies and the other artists referenced throughout my thesis are Anglophone (and almost exclusively American) artists and subcultural contexts. In methodological terms this offered me greater access to archives, critical material and journalism relating to these artists. Being embedded and engaged with current debates and developments in the study of these artists, as a UK-based scholar also familiar with New York and the US, allowed me to draw on my own experience of relevant events, conferences, exhibitions and performances throughout the thesis (such as Pfahler's performance at Emalin Gallery or *Punk.London*). This is most clearly evident in my first two chapters, where I utilise archival material from my 2015 research trip to New York, and Chapter Three where I draw on an extensive interview, a private archive of correspondence and my personal relationship with Vaginal Davis to supplement the sparse materials otherwise available.

The potential Anglo-centrism of my choice of case-studies does give me pause, and I certainly do not mean to suggest that observations on the position of the polymathic artist in relation to post-punk may not be useful or revealing in non-Anglophone contexts. There is currently extremely interesting work being done on post-punk scenes in Eastern Europe by Agata Pyzik, for example, designed to similarly challenge the narrow frame of reference identified by Sabin.³⁰ As I have already suggested however, the particular artists I have identified also serve to open

³⁰ See Agata Pyzik, *Poor But Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (London: Zero Books, 2014).

up this narrowed frame of punk reference, by inhabiting gender, sexual and racial identities and class positions distinct from the more familiar examples of punk or post-punk artists. Whilst they emerge from Anglophone post-punk subcultures, they are not archetypal examples extensively represented in existing histories or analysis, and so do not rehearse the same narratives of limited scope. Indeed, by being embedded in the very scenes that have been afforded the most attention in subcultural histories of punk and post-punk (particularly, in the case of Lunch and Wojnarowicz, New York) their marginality reveals this limited scope in greater contrast than a less documented aspect of the punk scene. I place my case studies as central to the development of post-punk in an attempt to broaden the conception of the subculture to one which positions diversity of identity and artistic expression as a fundamental rather than peripheral characteristic.

The dynamic of sexuality as a distinguishing characteristic of my case studies, for example, highlights the importance and relevance of previous theorisations of 'queer punk', and the interactions and significance of different sexual identities and communities on the formation and development of punk and post-punk subcultures. Throughout this thesis, I draw extensively on the work of scholars interested in exploring the intersections between punk and queer identities, particularly José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam (and also referring to others like Nyong'o). This is perhaps clearest in my discussion of Davis in Chapter 3, but Wojnarowicz too represents a nexus between questions of queer identity and a punk/post-punk sensibility. Lunch, in her sexually voracious self-characterisation

also presents a clear challenge to heteronormative conceptions of post-punk subcultures.

As Nyong'o suggests, intersections between punk and queer might be theorised as 'an encounter between concepts lacking in fixed identitarian referent', and therefore I am careful that my engagement with theorisations of 'queer punk' do not position my case studies as a separate strand or subset of punk and/or post-punk subcultures.³¹ Spencer, for example, in her discussion of Queercore (to which Davis was foundational) writes that it was an 'independent cultural experience' from both the conventional punk scene and contemporary (1980s/90s) gay culture, where I instead suggest in Chapter Three that there is significant potential in viewing the Queercore scene as fundamental to the establishment and development of the post-punk scenes themselves.³² This is a point more fully articulated in my later engagement with Davis's work and the LA punk scene.

Within this thesis I do not place polymathic artistic practice as being characteristic of 'only' a queer manifestation of post-punk, but as also reflecting the instability of the conception of post-punk subcultures as ones whose 'core' participants are those who enforce or adhere to 'whitewashing and heteronormative protocols' of documentation.³³ I see this as speaking to Nyong'o's suggestion that

³¹ Tavia Nyong'o, 'Punk'd Theory', *Social Text*, 23 (2005), 19-34 (p. 20).

³² Spencer, p. 276.

³³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 95.

By rethinking the group or networking expressed across the social figurations of punk and queer in a nonidentitarian way, we may be able to uncouple the *sinthome*-homosexual metonymy, which compels us to see social negativity in an unnecessarily limited frame.³⁴

This is not to minimise the importance of queer theorisations of punk or remove the operative queerness of any artistic practice (as would be particularly problematic in relation to Wojnarowicz or Davis). Instead it is an attempt to expand the frame of reference for punk and post-punk Sabin raises as problematically narrow to one that acknowledges the centrality and interaction of different sexual and racial identifications with particular cultural dynamics and economic and environmental factors in the formation of a subcultural strategy of art-making.

My project is therefore broadly an historiographic one, evaluating the position of these post-punk polymath in relation to the development of cultural (and subcultural) histories that may be shaped by formal division between artistic practices, disciplinary limitations and artistic subject matter, as well as historical bias. As historian Carolyn Steedman writes in *Dust*, the project of historiography and historiographers involves beginning to

Disinter the ways in which [...] History has shaped Memory. This involves giving an account that is itself historical, of how this happened, and what is

³⁴ Tavia Nyong'o, 'Do You Want Queer Theory or Do You Want the Truth? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s', *Radical History Review*, 100 (2008), 102-119 (p. 117). Here *sinthome* refers to a Lacanian interlock between symbol and symptom.

happening now to the History that people do these things with: think by, imagine by, remember with.³⁵

There is a risk, however, perhaps as suggested by the above quote, that a narrowly historiographical analysis operates predominantly at a meta-discursive level removed from actual objects of study. I work to avoid this abstraction through a continual return to the work of my case studies, and I ground my analysis in discussion of artistic objects and the actual practices of artists rather than an abstractly historiographic analysis of their position.

Whilst also drawing on the work of historians like Pollock and Steedman, several of the key scholars I refer to in relation to my case studies may not be immediately thought of as maintaining a predominantly historiographical project. I deploy a variety of scholarly material with the conviction that in revising, rethinking and extending the ways that histories are written in relation to identity, race, sexuality and class this material is important to draw upon. In Chapter One, sociological scholars such as Howard Becker and the theories of Pierre Bourdieu are used to explore how the correlation between the economic and municipal environment of post-punk in New York fostered both a logistical impetus towards polymathy, in conjunction with the Sarah Thornton's notion of subcultural capital and Dick Hebdige's notion of bricolage. Questions of the boundary between art and life are also raised through the essays of Allan Kaprow.

³⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 67.

Chapter Two draws on the previously published material devoted to David Wojnarowicz, including the work of Dan Cameron, Cynthia Carr, Sylvère Lotringer and Jennifer Doyle, as well as critical reflection on the AIDS crisis and the 'Culture Wars' of the 1980s and 90s in America by Lucy Lippard, Jonathan Katz and Lauren DeLand. As the chapter develops, aspects of the cultural materialist work of Jonathan Dollimore are deployed alongside the reflections of Dennis Cooper, Sur Rodney (Sur) and other contemporaries to suggest and examine the extent to which the post-punk aspects of his work have been minimised or overlooked, particularly in relation to the censorship controversy around the removal of *A Fire in My Belly*. Chapter Three deploys the work of Doyle and José Esteban Muñoz, both predominantly performance studies scholars, in relation to Davis, with a further consideration of artistic labour and self-promotion through the Marxist theories of Antonio Gramsci, as well as the work of Jack Halberstam on failure as a queer strategy of subversion in relation to Davis's performance of *Memory Island* at the Tate Modern in 2011.

Appropriately enough for a project on diverse practices then, at different points throughout the thesis I will draw on these different bodies of knowledge as they become relevant. I also utilise material from cultural journalism and other non-academic instances of critical reflection throughout as a deliberate attempt to engage with the public profile of these artists as well as their scholarly one. I do so due to the particular potential of this material either as documents of a subculturally invested audience or instances of attempted mainstream engagement with

subcultural artistic practices. This eclecticism serves to allow me to embed my thinking about the ways that histories are constituted into discussion specifically related to the way that artists' work is discussed. I am therefore able to make observations on the relationship between journalism and scholarly material and of the ways artists (particularly those of an oppositional subculture) might continue to pursue their own unique agenda in relationship to increased archival attention. The enhanced archival potential of the internet also offers an interesting dimension to my project. The digitisation of subcultural archives has increased the accessibility of often previously unavailable material, particularly in relation to lesser-known artists, and allows a level of connection to be made between their practices that has not previously been possible, changing their level of accessibility.

Throughout the process of developing my research into this thesis, I have attempted to move away from a methodology that involves extended reflection of what other writers or critics leave out in their writing on my case studies, and towards a model of conducting the kinds of analysis that I believe is missing. Whilst I do devote time and space to literature reviews and critical assessments of existing material, it is perhaps problematic to suggest aspects of analysis lacking from existing critical material without also providing my own examples of what that missing examination would look like. Therefore, I continually attempt to both suggest areas where criticism of post-punk polymaths could be expanded, and enact that expansion through an analysis of particular artworks and their relation to each other within an artist's practice.

Intermediality and Interdisciplinarity

Throughout this thesis, I explore the question of how to write about artists committed to a practice that undoes boundaries of artistic form from a position within analytical frameworks (such as academic disciplines) that use those boundaries to identify appropriate subjects of study. It is here that the question of intermediality, of artists working in multiple forms, corresponds to the 'interdisciplinarity' of academics working across multiple areas of knowledge. If post-punk artists challenged the established manner in which to be an artist, then analysis which is oriented towards older, more rigid formulations of artistic practice is no longer adequate. One of the central concerns of my thesis is the question of how to work through the methodological problem of engaging with the work of difficult, contradictory and institutionally resistant artists within a rigorous academic context.

The study of artists who ignore or transgress against the established borders of formal categories of making relates interestingly to debates around the integrity of areas of study or criticism. It would be incorrect to assert that academic disciplines are immutable and relentlessly confining to scholars, though. There has been, since at least the 1960s, the emergence and promotion of a number of terms that reflect the increasingly blurred boundaries between disciplines within the academy, including the inter-, trans-, and multi-disciplinarity. These may refer to the propensity of scholars to borrow theoretical frameworks from each other's areas of interest, to shared subjects of analysis (such as particular artists or theorists), or

direct collaboration between scholars of different disciplines. The most ubiquitous is the portrayal of projects and research as interdisciplinary, despite the frequently unclear boundaries of that term.

Joe Moran describes interdisciplinarity as ‘any form of dialogue between two or more disciplines’, adding that the ‘value of the term, “interdisciplinary”, lies in its flexibility and indeterminacy’ and that as such ‘there are potentially as many forms of interdisciplinarity as there are disciplines.’³⁶ Julie Thompson Klein has also written influentially about the broad structural implications of an interdisciplinary scholarly practice. Of particular note is *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity*, which positions the interdisciplinary in relation to ‘boundary work’, the external and self-policing of institutional areas of interest within the academy. Klein’s point that categories of knowledge are ‘institutional not in the conventional sense of buildings and organisations but as a set of marks constructed and maintained in cultural space’ is crucial, as she observes that these marks ‘enable collectivities to tell their members where they are, where they may go or may not go, and how to conduct themselves’.³⁷ It is in this that disciplines (and interdisciplinarity) relate to the polymath, as these ‘cultural marks’ or disciplinary boundaries problematise the position of analysis which relates to work that does not correspond to the formal concerns or usual strategies of a discipline.

³⁶ Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity: The New Critical Idiom* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 14.

³⁷ Julie Thompson Klein, *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), p.35.

In some disciplines, of course, a degree of intermediality (of artists utilising more than one medium in their practice) is common, and I do not suggest that a painter who is also a sculptor represents a major disciplinary stumbling block to an art historian. Rosalind Krauss has, for example, developed the concept of a 'post-medium condition' and its theoretical underpinnings throughout her career. Based on a rejection of historicism and of the emphasis of traditional mediums as art historical criticism's defining factor, Krauss contends in her writing that a critical shift towards a focus on the processes of artists rather than their formal limitations allows for richer analysis in light of the development of art since the high Modernism of the 1960s.³⁸

Krauss's post-medium condition contends that the absence of medium-specificity, or the flux between modes of production, has become the norm in the visual arts, and that the exact media an artist uses to facilitate their practice matters less than their overarching aesthetic goal. In 'Reinventing the Medium', published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1999, Krauss quotes the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth's argument that being an artist 'now means to question the nature of art', and argues that artistic analysis must address this and embrace intermediality.³⁹ As a major figure in contemporary art historical discourse and founding editor of one of its most significant journals (*October*), Krauss's concept of the post-medium condition might suggest that my claim that practices which operate in multiple mediums pose a

³⁸ Krauss frames the post-medium condition most explicitly in *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1999), 289-305, and 'Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition', *October*, 116 (2006), 52-62.

³⁹ Joseph Kosuth, quoted in Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', p. 294.

difficulty for artistic analysis is less secure. However, 'intermediality' of this kind as an object of study within a particular discipline often still maintains the underlying limitations of a disciplinary model of inclusion.

In 'Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition', published in *October*, Krauss emphasises the potential for practices that range across varied media to be used to establish new aesthetic criteria for artistic analysis within themselves, 'a new set of aesthetic conventions to which their works can then reflexively gesture'.⁴⁰ It is in this canonising, institutionalising, even formalising impulse that the post-medium condition begins to appear less relevant to my discussion of polymath artists. Krauss' intermedial analysis, whilst seeming to critique disciplinary limitations of medium, arguably reinforces a different, but no less limiting, set of aesthetic and theoretical criteria for suitable objects of study. Although moving away from the historical notions of medium specificity, Krauss post-medium condition 'is another way of stating the need for the idea of the medium as such to reclaim the specific from the deadening embrace of the general', as she puts it.⁴¹ Krauss' emphasis on correct, satisfactory or acceptable uses of art and artistic techniques reinforces canonicity by limiting the critical framework of art historians to a small range of practices by artists embedded in the gallery system. I return to this issue in Chapter Two, and my discussion of the critical position of David Wojnarowicz.

⁴⁰ Krauss, 'Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition', p. 57.

⁴¹ Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', p. 305.

In Krauss' theorisation there still remains a discernible tendency towards value, towards the gauging of the 'success' or 'worth' of art, despite her stated aim of reinforcing process over such judgements. Krauss is consistently engaged in positioning work within or without the scope of artistic criticism, and as 'good' or 'bad'.⁴² Discussing the potential of replacing the term 'medium' with Stanley Cavell's 'automatism', Krauss highlights her own critical predication of notions of worth and value. Referring to the boundaries of medium she writes:

The conventions in question need not be as strict as those of a fugue or sonnet; they might be exceedingly loose or schematic. But without them there would be no possibility of judging the success or failure of such improvisation. Expressiveness would have no goal, so to speak.⁴³

It is revealing that Krauss emphasises the importance of expressiveness needing a goal. For Krauss, the role of the academic is a critical one, to assess work that is worthy, in the full sense of being *of worth*. I argue instead that there is a powerful agency in art that is created in the spirit of not having easily discernible 'worth', that is created with the expectation of being unintelligible or unrecognisable beyond its intended audience or original context, a concept which relates crucially to the idea of a subculture. The art of the fringe, the outsider or the freak can provide critical material that may be better able to engage with or represent societal, political or cultural issues, and it is that species of work that is the subject of this thesis. Many

⁴² Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', p. 295.

⁴³ Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*, p. 6.

of the artists I reference subvert their own opportunities for success in an institutional context, their subcultural identification manifesting in examples of self-sabotage, or deliberate challenges to this idea of worth. In the case of the artists I discuss, this is also compounded by the content of much of their work, particularly the emphasis on trash, sex and offence; refusals to be conventionally entertaining; insistence on base or niche language and cultural references and the occupation of inaccessible venues. Unlike Krauss, I believe that this might represent an emancipatory rejection of the need to assess success or failure.

What I mean to demonstrate in my brief discussion of Krauss here is that even though intermediality is not an inherently insurmountable problem for all disciplines, approaches like Krauss's often explore the potential of intermedial practices to succeed within the criteria of the already existing discipline, in this case art history. The cultural marks that Klein refers to continue to exert influence on the development of their central canons: the core of the subject, those artists valued as most significant or central to a given field and the particular systems of value that allow certain intermedial practices to be endorsed within a discipline. They do not necessarily apply to work that is invested in subcultural subversion and the rejection of cultural convention wholesale, as my case studies in this thesis are.

Whilst existing intermedial analysis within disciplines might therefore not be a satisfactory solution to the problem of the post-punk polymath, simply suggesting their practices can be explored through an interdisciplinary scholarship also does not present an unproblematic model for work that is concerned with practices who

pursue an often-confrontational subcultural agenda. Although Klein, like Moran, emphasises the flexibility of the concept, she limits interdisciplinarity to three 'generic contexts of disciplinary interaction: borrowing, relations with disciplinary neighbours, and the formation of interdisciplines'.⁴⁴ This is useful to consider in relation to its confirmation of the logic of disciplines. The first two of these three contexts presuppose a stable disciplinary position from which to operate, one which scholars engaging with the work of the post-punk polymath may not have, and as I refer to above might be limited by ingrained notions of worth. Klein's third context (the formation of interdisciplines) suggests that the solution to analysis not able to be accommodated is effectively the creation of a new discipline, which will of course in time enforce its own boundaries of what is relevant analysis. Ultimately, as Klein points out '[e]ven interdisciplinary knowledge is partial knowledge'.⁴⁵

As Klein's three contexts suggest, and as Shannon Jackson writes in *Professing Performance*, 'interdisciplinarity depends, of course, on a notion of disciplinarity', reflecting the argument that logically, in order to move between disciplines, there must be disciplinary positions to move between.⁴⁶ The amorphous nature of the work of post-punk polymath artists poses a difficulty for analysis, particularly for writers in the academy, which I suggest might be the result of what Jackson calls 'prior disciplinary affiliation' which causes them to 'emphasise certain figures over others'.⁴⁷ Polymath artists who have no obvious formal allegiance to an art form,

⁴⁴ Klein, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Klein, p. 57

⁴⁶ Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 15.

⁴⁷ Jackson, p. 12.

and particularly those whose subcultural identification with post-punk leads to an antagonistic relationship to institutions, funding and recognition from the academy, do not have a formal correlation to a disciplinary affiliation. There is no established critical 'home' from which scholars versed in their project can emphasise their practices as significant. There is, I would argue, no 'prior disciplinary affiliation' that might result in a significant number of scholars putting forth Lydia Lunch or Vaginal Davis as artists whose practices are worthy of emphasis over examples drawn from other, less amorphously constituted models of artistic production.

In recognition of some of the inherent limitations of the notion of interdisciplinarity, there are other terms that have been proposed and advocated for. Ronald Jones argues that the basis of the term interdisciplinary in the notion of disciplines, as Moran, Klein and Jackson all refer to, is problematic. As Jones observes in the context of a conversation on 'super-hybridity' from 2010: '[i]n my experience, using disciplines as a starting point makes realizing the hybrid – whether interdisciplinary of transdisciplinary – more difficult. It's an irrelevant first step'.⁴⁸ For Jones, 'Transdisciplinarity [...] occurs when an interdisciplinary hybrid is no longer served by being reciprocal but transcends the limits of the original collaboration to create a third practice that is unforeseen and therefore entirely new'.⁴⁹

When Jones proposes that the process of transcending interdisciplinarity creates a third, 'entirely new' practice that allows critics and scholars to judge 'where your

⁴⁸ Ronald Jones, 'Analyze This: A Roundtable Discussion on "Super-Hybridity"', *Frieze*, 133 (September 2010), 93-102 (p. 97).

⁴⁹ Jones, p. 97.

expertise will be relevant in exploiting and multiplying the existing value of an idea outside your own sphere of influence', it undermines the idea that there might be practices whose conceptual basis rests on a subversion of that judgement of expertise.⁵⁰ It also seems paradoxically committed to the framework of disciplines through its proposed establishment of a third, new discipline by moving outside of the confines of two or more.

At a certain level these arguments reach the point of opacity, with different permutations of each term failing to clearly relate to examples or concrete objects of study. Klein writes, for example:

A critical interdisciplinarity conceived in opposition to both disciplinarity and part interdisciplinary practices is counterdisciplinary in stance, usually multidisciplinary in form, sometimes collaborative in its work patterns, and transdisciplinary in its creation of a broadly shared category of culture.⁵¹

Whilst Klein is attempting to use these different prefixes to refer to specific formulations of disciplinary interaction, they are all contested terms that lack a fixed relation to the work of other scholars and texts. The term multidisciplinary for example, which Klein suggests might be used synonymously with 'an interdisciplinary solution' or 'transdisciplinary paradigm', is not used by Moran in the same way.⁵² Moran uses the term to 'refer to the simple juxtaposition of two or

⁵⁰ Jones, p. 97

⁵¹ Klein, p. 129.

⁵² Klein, p. 10.

more disciplines, as one finds on certain joint-honours or combined-arts degrees'.⁵³

This confusing and often contradictory definition of terms suggests the circular nature of the debate. As Klein writes, the 'claims codified in terminology reflect differing notions of what constitutes a discipline, philosophical and social viewpoints, and opinions about whether interdisciplinarity is primarily an issue of research, education or administration'.⁵⁴

Therefore, whilst this technical differentiation between terms is useful and important work, there is a danger that it diverts attention once again from the artists themselves and the work they produce. As artist and theorist Hito Steyerl remarks, in the same conversation in which Jones outlines his fidelity to the term transdisciplinarity:

All these composites (starting off with 'post-', 'hyper-', 'trans-', etc.) in my view demonstrate the loss of faith in what they're attached to, while failing to overcome it. [...] I'm keen to leave the era of the 'post-' and 'inter-' behind, and am hoping for someone to come up with an exciting term for this situation. A little more sex, a little less biology, please – and nothing cool. That would be awful.⁵⁵

⁵³ Moran, p.14.

⁵⁴ Klein, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Hito Steyerl, 'Analyze This: A Roundtable Discussion on "Super-hybridity"', *Frieze* (September 2010), 93-102, p. 101.

Steyerl's reference to biology rather than sex is a mischievous dig at overly theorised discussions of interesting material – implying that a fixation on biological processes undoes the 'sexiness' of sex, which is an equally important consideration. In relation to the artistic activities of the post-punk polymath, extended articulation of my own version of interdisciplinarity in relation to the terminological inconsistencies of the debate undermines my suggestion of the importance of an unfixed disciplinary relation in analysis of their practices. To this end I propose the figure of the polymath as one which exists outside of disciplinary affiliations. It is definitely not a 'cool' or modish phrase, but it is the term I have chosen, partly inspired by Steyerl's charge to demonstrate a faith or level of belief in the uniqueness and durability of the practices I discuss. I use the term in order to name the practice of artists whose work across different media and art forms is of sustained, deliberate and of equal significance, and who require an articulation of their practices on the part of a scholar that does not frame them as merely intermedial work by an accepted artist, or as part of an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary critical project, but recognises that its resistance to disciplinary accommodation is an intrinsic part of the practice's appeal and success.

This is not to put forth the term polymath as a palliative answer to concerns about interdisciplinary terminology, holding up my own term and approach as 'the unifying solution to everyone else's confusion', as Jackson warns against.⁵⁶ It is certainly necessary to be aware of the subjective position a critic or writer brings to any

⁵⁶ Jackson, p. 32.

reevaluation of material, a concern that is particularly relevant to my discussion of the polymath as it relates to post-punk. On my own part, my background as a performance scholar predisposes my research to favour artists with an element of live performance in their practice, for example. I therefore recognise that my approach is that of a performance studies scholar investigating polymathic practices, which might necessitate the engagement with theoretical frameworks drawn from other disciplines, whether musicology, film or art history.

Performance studies is an interesting ‘prior disciplinary affiliation’, as Jackson would term it, to approach these post-punk polymaths from. Phillip Auslander, in his manifesto on the engagement of performance studies scholars with popular music, suggests they are uniquely positioned to offer analysis that also attends ‘to the particulars of physical movement, gesture, costume, and facial expressions as much as voice and musical sound’, which are often overlooked in other considerations.⁵⁷ I agree with Auslander’s observation that the analytical strategies of performance studies offer an opportunity to enact close readings of the performances of my post-punk polymaths that might not be as present in other disciplinary contexts. My insistence on the importance of the experience of engaging with the art objects, the actual work of the artists I write about, is then one that comes from my work within performance studies. I see this as addressing the problem of superficial or partial engagement with the practices of polymathic artists, and aiding in subverting the historiographic abstraction that I refer to earlier.

⁵⁷ Phillip Auslander, ‘Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 14 (2004), 1-13 (p. 3).

My interest in subcultural movements and the counterculture also prevents me from approaching these marginal practices entirely neutrally – and neither would I wish to do so. As I examine in detail below, and particularly in Chapter Three, the relationship of scholars to subcultures, and of myself to both the subcultures and artists I am writing about, is an important element of this thesis. I am of course sympathetic to the project of these artists (and the subcultural challenge to notions of value), and believe that to bring a level of scholarly capital to these artists through the mechanism of my thesis is a useful project. When the basis of a body of work is constituted through a subcultural identification against recognition, knowledge of and identification with the subcultural context and the artist's relationship to that context may be required in order to enact an artistic analysis that approaches it with seriousness. I endeavour throughout to take what might appear like flippant or deliberately counter-productive statements and practices seriously. As I discuss in detail in each subsequent chapter, this subcultural challenge relates to the identity of the artists in terms of their class position, race gender, sexuality, financial security and education, giving a political dimension to my attempt to do so.

Having said that, as I discuss in my survey of subcultural theory below, it has been argued that many scholars believed too strongly in punk's (or post-punk's) transformative possibilities, their theories being 'premised upon an over investment

in the oppositional potential' of their subjects, as Robert Garnett observes.⁵⁸ I intend to avoid falling into the same trap of overstating either the innovation or political potential of my artists by, as I have already suggested, grounding my analysis through detailed examination of the artists' practices, supplying concrete artistic examples in relation to critical theorisation and clearly articulating my own relationship to the practices I discuss. This is in part inspired by Furness's charge to academics to reconsider personal taste and subcultural identification, to examine how 'priorities and passions get reconfigured by and through their experiences as theorists, artists, activists, educators and misfits working amidst the often tumultuous landscape of the modern university'.⁵⁹

Rationale for Selection and Wider Potentials

My three main case studies of Wojnarowicz, Lunch and Davis are not the only underrepresented post-punk polymaths. There are several other artists that might have been explored instead, such as Ann Magnuson or Alan Vega, and more who do appear throughout this thesis as secondary examples and alternative figures, such as Pfahler. My thesis is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of all those who might be considered a post-punk polymath, but a process of sustained engagement with three particularly apposite case studies. The research therefore contributes both an otherwise lacking critical engagement with three artists whose practices are

⁵⁸ Robert Garnett, 'Too Low to be Low: Art Pop and the Sex Pistols', in *Punk Rock: So What?*, pp. 17-30 (p. 19).

⁵⁹ Furness, pp. 19-20.

under-examined, and initiates a wider conversation about the position of artists whose practices transcend formal artistic boundaries in a subcultural context.

Lunch, Wojnarowicz and Davis are all positioned on the cusp of a certain level of cultural visibility. They are cult figures whose practices have a level of significance within their subcultural milieu that does not necessarily translate to wider cultural acknowledgement or critical engagement, and resists (or resisted) established notions of 'success'. The varying degrees to which this applies to my case studies was a key aspect of my choice of their work as a focus. The artists I write about are marginal not only in the sense of being critically underappreciated, but in the sense of a still subculturally resonant rejection of opportunities and developments in their artistic career that would allow them a more secure future or greater level of physical comfort. In his lifetime (until his premature death in 1992), David Wojnarowicz's financial resources were modest, for example, as indeed are those of Lunch and Davis. These artists were/are committed to their mode of production, and have maintained it despite this.

Although I contend the post-punk polymath represents a particular difficulty for scholars, there are many examples of artists who work across media and form and are still highly regarded critically, such as Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, David Bowie, Marcel Duchamp, Mike Kelley and Yoko Ono. Warhol in particular is one of the most critically significant artists of the twentieth century, whilst also being one who touched 'every artistic discipline, or almost', producing paintings, film, journalistic

writing, novels, memoirs and various art/life collisions.⁶⁰ As in my engagement with Krauss above, my argument is therefore not simply that being a polymath, working across artistic forms, automatically leaves the artist isolated from critical structures, but rather that, even as punk and post-punk have been assimilated into institutional agendas and collections, and as it has appeared more often in the histories and canons of academic disciplines (such as design or visual art), these post-punk polymaths have not been incorporated or accommodated in the same way as their contemporaries.

As Arthur Danto writes, Warhol 'belonged to an art world – a complex of dealers, writers, collectors and, of course, other artists, that was disposed to taking his work seriously'.⁶¹ The artists that make up my main examples were not supported in that way, and took/take a very different view to that espoused by Warhol when he remarks 'making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art'.⁶² Whilst Warhol was polymathic in his artistic production, he worked extensively to engage with the existing model of artistic development, establishing himself masterfully within the art market, ingratiating himself with celebrities and cultivating a public persona as one of America's foremost bohemians. My analytic interest is instead in those whose full breadth of practices have been largely overlooked, after stating their desire to be, where fidelity to a subcultural ideal of

⁶⁰ Stéphane Aquin, 'Andy Warhol, Musician', in *Warhol Live*, ed. by Stéphane Aquin (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2008), pp. 18-23 (p. 18).

⁶¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 25-26.

⁶² Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*, (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 92.

anti-institutional, anti-market and anti-academy sentiment has been to some extent fulfilled.

This commitment manifests as an often-explicit resistance from these artists to their own inclusion in disciplinary histories and in the canons of individual art forms. To that end, none of the artists that I have chosen to focus on are entirely unknown to the academy, or completely unrepresented in artistic journalism. The backdrop of increasing and sustained critical and popular attention to post-punk, of an emerging historical understanding of the period, ensures that there is enough material to engage with in order to accurately judge patterns, omissions and orthodoxies, and to assess the influence of the changing critical landscape on my polymath case studies.

Wojnarowicz, for example, is now due a Whitney Museum of American Art retrospective in 2018 (postponed from 2016), suggesting the profile of his work is being raised even further.⁶³ It of course remains to be seen what form this retrospective will take, how it will be received and whether it will do anything to reassert the importance of post-punk contexts to the development of his practice, as I attempt to in Chapter Two. Similarly, in the first months of 2017, a crowd-funding campaign was launched for *Lydia Lunch: The War is Never Over*, a comprehensive documentary by cult film director Beth B that may well raise the

⁶³ The Whitney cited 'administrative and scheduling conflicts' in an email dated 15 October 2016 following my enquiry regarding the reason for this postponement.

artist's public profile on its release.⁶⁴ I see the success of this campaign as being interestingly demonstrative of the fervour of her fans, and of the potential of digital models of subcultural interaction to highlight the significance of practices otherwise underrepresented in conventional models of documentation.

Post-Punk as a Subculture

I have consistently referred to post-punk scenes as subcultures throughout this introduction so far, and subcultural theory is indeed one of the most important theoretical frameworks for my analysis. Whilst I will explore the exact character of the post-punk subcultures each artist was engaged in through the case studies that constitute the main body of each chapter, it is important to first detail and review my sources for the articulation of them as subcultures at all. It is necessary to define my working articulation of what a subculture is, how post-punk represents one, and how that definition has subsequent bearing on the case studies that follow. Several key concepts that reappear throughout my thesis, particularly subcultural capital and the model of distinction from a 'parent culture', require a thorough grounding in the development of the concept of subcultures.

As explained by Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts in *Resistance Through Rituals*, from 1976, subcultural theory in its broadest sense

⁶⁴ The crowd-funding campaign for *Lydia Lunch: The War is Never Over* successfully raised \$62,314 for principal filming and post-production.
<<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1339534802/lydia-lunch-a-feature-documentary-film-by-beth-b/description>> [accessed 17 April 2017].

concerns distinct cultural groupings that exist in a subordinate relationship and in contrast to both the 'dominant culture' and their 'parent culture'. This parent culture represents local relationships and specific differences between the subculture and what it reacts against, whilst the dominant represents the wider disposition of power within a society in general terms. These scholars were all members of Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), an institution that is formative in the development of the analysis of subcultures since the 1970s. Hall became its director in 1968, and pioneered an interdisciplinary approach to its remit, with a strong Marxist and post-structuralist bent.

Perhaps their most significant contribution to the development of subcultural studies was the publication of *Resistance Through Rituals*, an edited collection which combined an extensive introduction to the field with short essays by Dick Hebdige and other important contributors. As Marxist critics, Hall et al position class as the key factor in the establishment and development of the relationship between different cultures. Hall, Jefferson, and the other co-authors give a definition of a culture as referring to the 'distinctive "way of life" of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in the institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in *mores* and customs, in the uses of objects and material life'.⁶⁵ Building on this, they define the dominant culture as representing the hegemonic system of structures and meanings that reflects the 'positions and interests of the

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class', in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson Education, 1986), pp. 9-74 (p. 10). Emphasis in original.

most powerful class' in Western societies: the bourgeoisie who maintain its capitalist underpinnings.⁶⁶

Subordinate classes will 'each have distinctive cultures' and perceive themselves to be different. These local 'parent cultures' are those that include the everyday manifestations of culture, such as class conventions of dress, artistic taste, acceptable or appropriate behaviour, familial and sexual relationships and parental expectations. Despite these variations though, each 'subordinate culture experiences itself in terms prescribed by the dominant', and these terms then dictate the development of each.⁶⁷ The dominant culture frames the concentration of power across the various cultures that make up a society, prescribing 'not the specific content of ideas, but the limits through which ideas and conflicts move and are resolved'.⁶⁸

Hall et al. characterise subcultures as existing in a double articulation against both their parent culture and the dominant. Closely linked to the practices of youth and the working-class, to them subcultures are groupings which exhibit characteristics of style, consumption or relationships (personal, political, sexual, etc.) that are differentiated from the activities of their parent culture, and represent and respond to inadequacies in the dominant culture. Ken Gelder synthesises the CCCS argument as such; when 'working-class communities are undergoing change and displacement – when the "parent culture" is no longer cohesive – youth (and the focus here is

⁶⁶ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 39.

always on working-class youth) responds by becoming subcultural'.⁶⁹ As Gelder suggests, to the CCCS, subcultures are almost exclusively related to working-class subjects, a point I expand on below. But broadly subcultures develop, in the CCCS model, as an attempt to either more fully inhabit or transcend class disjunctions through a reinvention of personal identity.

To understand subcultures then, it is important to examine them both in relation to their parent culture, perhaps more easily recognisable in its expression through style, or a general pose of rebellion against certain aesthetic and interpersonal markers of identity; and to the dominant culture, the wider understanding of how class, economic systems and political relations shape the formation of the various cultures that make up a society. The positioning of the dominant in *Resistance Through Rituals* suggests that it is a fallacy to argue that subcultures are ever entirely able to break with the dominant culture and, with it, a capitalist model of economic relation.

Due to this shared framing within the dominant culture, the parent culture and subculture will not be entirely opposed to each other, but share some characteristics. As noted in *Resistance Through Rituals* a 'subculture, though differing in important ways – in its "focal concerns", its peculiar shapes and activities – from the culture from which it derives, will also share some things in common with that "parent" culture'.⁷⁰ This is particularly important for my work in this thesis, as it

⁶⁹ Ken Gelder, 'Introduction to Part Two', in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 83-89 (p. 84).

⁷⁰ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 13.

points to the necessity of locating and understanding subcultures within the particular historical context they emerge out of, and how they interact with what goes on in the parent culture they ostensibly reject. These environmental, economic and cultural contexts figure prominently in my subsequent analysis of the work of Lunch, Wojnarowicz and Davis and their post-punk subcultures.

The Study of Subcultures

Subcultures as distinct youth groups in a dynamic of class relation are not the only ways in which subcultures have been framed, however. Before the CCCS, the study of subcultures as a distinctive mode of societal relationship began in the 1920s and 1930s with the work of the group of sociologists and criminologists that made up the first incarnation of the 'Chicago School'. The Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago (the first established anywhere in the world) was an environment where, as Gelder writes, 'sociology, social anthropology and criminology merged in studies of "eccentric" urban social groups'.⁷¹ These early studies were primarily concerned with participant observation of professional criminals, street gangs and delinquents (as in the work of Frederic Thrasher and Nels Anderson), rather than the youth cultures most associated with the term subculture today.⁷²

⁷¹ Ken Gelder, 'Chicago, Birmingham, Scenes and Communities', in *Subcultures: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies: Vol. II*, ed. by Ken Gelder (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 1-11 (p. 1).

⁷² See Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927) and Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923).

Sarah Thornton writes that in the early stages of the emergence of sociology as a discipline, the Chicago School 'came to be seen as the advocate of qualitative empirical research' and therefore associated with 'a specific kind of urban micro-sociology which gave particular attention to the interaction of people's perceptions of themselves with others' view of them'.⁷³ In contrast to the more philosophically inclined work of early sociological theorists like Talcott Parsons at Harvard, or the statistical investigations taking place by William Ogburn and others at Columbia University, the sociologists of the Chicago School used field work, immersion in the communities or social groupings they studied and interrogative questioning to engage directly with groups at a remove (or perceiving themselves to be at a remove) from their parent culture.⁷⁴

Published in 1979, the book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige (who studied with Hall at CCCS) is an important reference point for my discussion of punk (and therefore discussed in detail below). Usefully however it also offers his précis of the development of subcultural theory from the 1930s to the late 1970s, in which he writes that the work derived from the participant-observation model of the Chicago School referenced above 'suffers from a number of significant flaws', including 'the absence of any analytical or explanatory framework'.⁷⁵ Hebdige then

⁷³ Sarah Thornton, 'Introduction to Part One', in *The Subcultures Reader*, pp. 11-15 (p. 11).

⁷⁴ For examples of this statistical work see William Fielding Ogburn, *Social Change: With Respect to Culture and Original Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 1922). The more philosophical approach of the Harvard department can be seen in Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers* (New York: Free Press, 1937).

⁷⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), pp. 75-76.

explains that 'such an absence has ensured that whilst accounts provide a wealth of descriptive detail, the significance of class and power relations is consistently neglected or underestimated'.⁷⁶ Hebdige goes on to cite the work of Albert Cohen and Walter Miller in the 1950s as attempting to supply the 'missing theoretical perspective' to this kind of participant observation and engagement.⁷⁷ Their work too was primarily concerned with explicitly criminal subcultures, juvenile gangs in particular, and 'stressed the compensatory function of the juvenile gang', with the gang providing an alternative value system that allowed working-class adolescents to 'develop alternative sources of self-esteem'.⁷⁸

Cohen and Miller's proposition was most significantly used, in turn, as a foundation for the work of David Matza (in collaboration with Gresham Sykes) in the 1960s. It was in this analysis, collected into the book *Delinquency and Drift* (1964), that the existence of 'legitimate as well as delinquent youth cultures' was first acknowledged and articulated.⁷⁹ Matza and Sykes develop the concept of 'subterranean values' (which echoes Cohen and Miller's work) as the rationale for a drift between transgressive and conforming behaviour amongst the young as they mature. These values were described as being 'values that the individual holds to and believes in but are recognized as not being quite *comme il faut* [correct in behaviour]'.⁸⁰ This suggested both that subcultures acted in dialogue with the parent culture, and that

⁷⁶ Hebdige, pp. 75-76.

⁷⁷ Hebdige, p. 76.

⁷⁸ Hebdige, p. 76.

⁷⁹ Hebdige, p. 76.

⁸⁰ David Matza and Gresham M. Sykes, 'Delinquency and Subterranean Values', *American Sociological Review*, 26 (1961), 712-719, (p. 716).

those who embraced them were able to ‘drift’ in and out of what was seen as acceptable behaviour and not without it representing a commitment to delinquency as a wholehearted rejection of society, or a forever-criminal existence. I see this concept of drift as being relevant to my subsequent analysis, as the practice of a post-punk polymath may drift between both mediums and what is perceived as relevant or even acceptable elements of an artistic practice.

Howard S. Becker, a member of the second incarnation of the Chicago School in the 1960s, also had significant influence on the development of a subcultural theory that might apply to musicians, artists and other bohemians, rather than professional criminals. He belonged to a second wave of sociologists at the University of Chicago that built on the participant-focused work of the first, and pioneered the use of detailed qualitative data analysis alongside participant observation. Becker’s *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociologies of Deviance* (1963) focuses on jazz musicians and marijuana-users, two (often overlapping) groups that he saw as being deviant only as a result of the external labelling of their activity and lifestyle as deviant, rather than as a result of the inherent immorality or wrongness of that activity. For Becker, ‘deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender”’.⁸¹ This potential endorsement of subcultural activity represents an important shift in the relationship between a theorist and the participants within a subculture. Becker’s book is interesting in this due also to his personal participation as a jazz

⁸¹ Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 9.

musician in the bars of Chicago as a postgraduate student. His participation reveals a tension also present in my own analysis, around the personal investment of the researcher in the subculture they write about, which I explore further in Chapter Three.

In Britain in the 1970s, Phil Cohen's work similarly suggested that subcultures, rather than being intrinsically delinquent or criminal, revealed 'internal conflicts in the parent culture', and that the subcultures of the working-class East London communities his work focused on were variations on the 'contradiction, at an ideological level, between traditional working-class puritanism and the new hedonism of consumption' in the twentieth century.⁸² The work of Stanley Cohen (no relation) articulated a similar concept of labelling as constitutive of subcultural activity, with his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) detailing the way in which the collective media representation of subcultures 'labels rule-breakers as belonging to certain deviant groups and how, once the person is thus type cast, his acts are interpreted in terms of the status to which he has been assigned'.⁸³ These contributions furthered the concept of subcultures existing both as reactions to and against the material inadequacies of the working-class in relation to the new drive to consumption in society, but also being constituted by the reactions of the parent culture as much as the participants themselves. The concept of a subculture being

⁸² Phil Cohen, 'Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community [1972]', *The Subcultures Reader*, pp. 90-99 (p. 90).

⁸³ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

externally (or even retroactively) demarcated is also raised in my discussion in Chapter One of the 'No Wave' post-punk scene in New York.

The early foundations to subcultural theory were most clearly and persuasively synthesised and developed through the work that emerged from the late 1960s to the 1980s in Britain, largely, as I have already mentioned, through the work of the CCCS. Becker, Matza and Sykes are specifically cited as an inspiration to the work of the CCCS scholars. *Resistance Through Rituals*, referencing Phil Cohen, argues that disenfranchised working-class youth adopt a subculture as a form of resistance against the hegemony of a parent culture governed by the structures of the dominant culture, attempting to resolve their class position through modified leisure activities and style. As it is summarised in their introduction:

What we would argue, in general terms, is that the young inherit a cultural orientation from their parents towards a 'problematic' common to the class as a whole, which is likely to weight, shape and signify the meanings they then attach to different areas of their social life.⁸⁴

Whilst, as I refer to above, the CCCS model is extremely useful in both articulating the difference between the dominant and parent cultures and the relation that subcultural activity may have in relation to it, it is important to acknowledge that the CCCS model is not without its flaws. The fixation of the CCCS authors on subcultures

⁸⁴ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 29.

being a phenomenon only really relevant and potent in relation to working-class identity has been consistently critiqued by other subcultural scholars, particularly Stanley Cohen and Ken Gelder, who advocate for subculture as not 'a single, over-determined response to particular conditions but as one kind of response amongst others'.⁸⁵

Resistance Through Rituals distinguishes what it terms 'middle-class counter-cultures' from working-class subcultures as being 'more diffuse, less group-centred, more individualised' and amounting more to a 'counter-cultural milieu' than a tight subcultural grouping.⁸⁶ They cite hippies as being an archetypal example of this middle-class counter-culture. Although not entirely pessimistic about the possibilities of middle-class counter-cultures to generate social change, the CCCS authors position the counter-culture as a lesser force than the working-class subculture, arguing that in a counter-culture's "'practical critique" of the dominant culture from a privileged position inside it, they have come to inhabit, embody and express many of the contradictions of the systems itself'.⁸⁷ The counter-culture, they would argue, operates on a predominantly symbolic level rather than a practical one, highlighting and prefiguring some of the same 'outdated social, cultural, political and ideological' contradictions at the heart of society as subcultures, but only coming 'half-way on the road to making [them] manifest'.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ken Gelder, 'Introduction to Part Three', *The Subcultures Reader*, pp. 145-148 (p. 146).

⁸⁶ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 60.

⁸⁷ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 60.

⁸⁸ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 71.

Later scholarship however, and particularly that around the advent of punk, which existed as both a middle-class movement (primarily in its instigation by figures like Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood) and a working-class one in the expansion of its audience, has problematised this distinction. This expansion of the term subculture has been influential, and largely the distinction Hall et al. make between a counter-culture and a subculture has not been maintained within subcultural studies. Sarah Thornton, writing in 1995, states that she finds the CCCS scholars' definitions 'empirically unworkable'.⁸⁹ For Thornton the 'Birmingham tradition [CCCS]' saw subcultures as 'transparent niches in an opaque world', with both a romantic attachment to their resistant potential and an insufficiently expansive attitude to what a subculture might be.⁹⁰ In light of this later criticism, 'subculture' has come to be the accepted term for both the loose cultural milieu that the CCCS authors name a counter-culture as well as other tightly bound and uniform groups of participants. My preferred term is also subculture, and any use of the counter-culture in citation is done synonymously unless noted.

It is also worth acknowledging that, alongside the preoccupation of CCCS with being working-class as an essential aspect of engaging in subcultural activity, their analysis rarely engages with gender as a contributing factor to the resistant nature of participant's activity. As in their class-based differentiation of middle-class counter-culture and working-class subculture, the CCCS tacitly conceive of subcultures in quite narrow terms as an implicitly male working-class phenomenon. Hall and

⁸⁹ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 8.

⁹⁰ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 119.

Jefferson acknowledge this, perhaps, by their inclusion in the book of 'Girls and Subcultures', a short essay by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber. In the essay McRobbie and Garber raise the issue of women being 'absent from the classic sub-cultural ethnographic studies, the 'pop' histories [...], personal accounts [...], or journalistic surveys', and interrogate briefly why this may be the case.⁹¹

They conclude that whilst the subcultures typically investigated (Teddy Boys, Skinheads, Mods and Rockers, etc.) may be less appealing and/or accessible to women and girls, the preponderance of male theorists and sexualised media reports ensure that the smaller numbers of female participants in the same subcultures and women's specific subcultural tactics are rarely considered in detail: '[f]emale invisibility in youth subcultures then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy'.⁹² My choice of Lunch as a case study was influenced in part by this charge, as a woman central to the post-punk subculture of the Lower East Side. I explore her practice in relation to the articulation of female punk participants in Chapter One.

Even acknowledging these caveats, what the CCCS authors articulate is a concept of subcultures that emerges in relation to specific social situations and class dynamics and to wider moments in economic and cultural terms that govern the shape and makeup of a subculture at the point of its emergence. This is particularly relevant to my argument that the emergence of the subculture of post-punk creates space for a polymathic, interdisciplinary form of art-making and that the particular cultural

⁹¹ Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, 'Girls and Subcultures', in *Resistance Through Rituals*, pp. 209-222 (p. 209).

⁹² McRobbie and Garber, p. 212

context of the emergence and peak of a subculture offers a unique opportunity for the polymathic. New York in the late 1970s, for example, provided the context for the emergence of (American) punk and later post-punk subcultures, which fostered the polymathic activity of Lunch, Wojnarowicz and others. The work of CCCS to position subcultures in relation to their context and in dialogue with the axes of class, economics, race and other societal power relations is immensely valuable and significant in both the development of subcultural theory and to my work in this thesis.

Subcultural Style

One other aspect of *Resistance Through Rituals* vitally important to my research is its definition of style in a subcultural context. Style is presented as one of the methods through which members of a subculture constitute their resistance, the 'active organisation of objects with activities and outlooks, which produce an organised group-identity in the form and shape of a coherent and distinctive way of "being in the world"'.⁹³ This style was used to differentiate participants from both the parent culture and other subcultural groupings (for example, between Teddy Boys and Skinheads) and 'consolidates the group from a loosely focused to a tightly bound entity'.⁹⁴ The style of post-punk subcultures in New York and Los Angeles, particularly the insistence on taboo or transgressive imagery in New York and niche

⁹³ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 54.

⁹⁴ Hall, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, p. 56.

encoding of cultural citation in Los Angeles, is a factor in my framing of both the distinction and critical marginality of the post-punk polymath.

A key figure in the further exposition of style as a governing concern of subcultural analysis is the previously mentioned Dick Hebdige, whom I reference at several points in this thesis. His book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* was written at the end of punk's emergence and highest notoriety (1978, for publication in mid-1979) and laid the basis for much of the subsequent analysis around punk and later subcultures more generally. Hebdige's book concretises and nuances the cultural strategies of first-wave punks in Britain, but was released as the mode shifted towards what is now known as post-punk, which I identify as beginning in 1978, referencing both Reynolds and Fisher. It is important to highlight that his observations are therefore based predominantly in the first iteration of punk, and to that which takes place in Britain (and effectively only in London in Hebdige's analysis), meaning that care must be taken in assuming it is directly transferrable to the post-punk context beyond 1978, or to the examination of the subculture outside of late 1970s London.

This acknowledgement should also be made more generally in relation to the UK-centric subcultural work of Hebdige, the CCCS, and others like Phil and Stanley Cohen. The application of these models requires similar caution, particularly in relation to my focus on American artists and contexts. The UK and the US punk and post-punk scenes are not directly analogous, and, like the work of the artists I discuss, the geographic and social specificity of these theoretical frameworks is

important to maintain and articulate. Whilst the original frame of subcultural studies is grounded in the social dynamics of the post-war UK, it has since been consistently applied to other contexts, particularly the US, in a manner that is often challenged as insufficiently reflective of cultural difference. Within this thesis however, it is not a direct application of these sociological frameworks to my artists and contexts that is my goal or sole intention. Instead I reflect on the interaction between these foundational subcultural concepts and the particular contexts of my artists, highlighting how the work of these polymaths both corresponds to and differs from the 'axis of success vs. failure, resistance vs. recuperation, authenticity vs. inauthenticity, and so on' that Furness suggests is characteristic of an overreliance on Hebdige's paradigm of resistance.⁹⁵ The model of resistance is certainly worth establishing here though, as doing so allows me to reflect on the differences as well as confluences in strategies undertaken by subcultural participants in the US contexts of my artists (New York and LA in the late 1970s and early 1980s) and the UK working-class case studies of Hebdige.

Hebdige positions the subcultural style of British subcultures (primarily punk, but also Teddy Boys, Mods, Skinheads and reggae club cultures) as a symbolic form of resistance against the contradictions of the society in which they exist, largely following the model proposed in *Resistance Through Rituals*. There are two key strands to Hebdige's argument in the book, the first relating to the formation process of a subculture's style, and the second to the cultural trajectory of a

⁹⁵ Furness, p.18.

subculture in relation to its accommodation within a series of parent cultures. Both of these strands are relevant to my later case studies. Hebdige argues that style, which emerges out of the subculture's combination of clothes, drugs, music and social posture, is constructed through a tissue of contextual references, often borrowed from previous subcultures or the dominant culture itself. Therefore, movements like punk or mod reconstitute symbols into new signifiers of rejection or solidarity, as when the mods repurpose the suit and tie from a symbol of middle-class respectability to a vaguely threatening expression of group solidarity and 'living for the weekend', for example.⁹⁶

In Hebdige's formulation symbols are assembled and repurposed through a process of assemblage, echoing previous meanings and accruing new ones through being part of a subcultural collage. Drawing on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Surrealist writer André Breton in his deployment of the term 'bricolage' to describe this process, Hebdige argues that punk style made

a decisive break not only with the parent culture but with its own location in experience. This break was both inscribed and re-enacted in the signifying practices embodied in punk style. [...] Thus whilst it is true that the symbolic objects in punk style (the safety pins, the pogo, the ECT hairstyles) were made to form a 'unity' [...] this unity was at once 'ruptural' and 'expressive'.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Hebdige discusses Mod's fixation on the weekend and times 'between the leaves of the commercial calendar'. See Hebdige, p. 53.

⁹⁷ Hebdige, p. 122.

This concept of bricolage has an immediate resonance to both the aggregational aesthetic and relationship to medium of the post-punk artists I reference. The semiotic resonance of the individual elements that are collected by the subcultural bricoleur are governed in part by their relation to the second major contribution made by Hebdige in his book. Hebdige outlines, alongside his description and analysis of the style of subcultures, the way in which that style relates to the incorporation and, ultimately, colonisation of subcultures by the mainstream. This process of incorporation and assimilation of a subculture as outlined by Hebdige is still the basis of much of the subcultural debate around the mainstreaming of punk and post-punk undertaken today, as referenced above in relation to academic interest in the subculture.

In his section 'Two Forms of Incorporation' Hebdige outlines the way that subcultures, on their emergence, provoke 'a wave of hysteria in the press' that 'fluctuates between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement'.⁹⁸ This may begin as a result of their stylistic innovations, such as the confrontational clothing of the punk movement, with the press then going on to explain their sartorial transgression through an increasing focus on criminal or delinquent behaviour, or vice versa (transgressive behaviour of the group drawing attention to their distinctive style). For Hebdige though, '[w]hich ever item opens the amplifying sequence, it invariably ends with the diffusion and defusion [*sic*] of the subcultural

⁹⁸ Hebdige, p. 93.

style’.⁹⁹ The subculture then becomes situated once again within the logic of the dominant and parent cultures that it attempts to resist.

Hebdige identifies two ways in which this reincorporation occurs, ‘the commodity form’, in which the stylistic qualities of a subculture are transformed into marketable and consumable goods and products, and the ‘ideological’ form. In the ideological form of incorporation, a subculture is either exoticised or stigmatised to the point of irrelevance, or trivialised and normalised in order to be characterised as existing in only a mildly antagonistic relationship with the mainstream. These two forms of containment, ideological and commodity, are not exclusive but actually complementary to each other, Hebdige reminding the reader that ‘we should avoid making any absolute distinction between the ideological and commercial “manipulations” of subculture’.¹⁰⁰ Certainly in the case of punk, as Hebdige notes, subcultures can be accommodated through the relationship of both. The current debates around the ideological incorporation of punk, with it being positioned as a golden age of creativity and a hallowed era of teenage rebellion (as exemplified by the *Punk.London* celebration in 2016) seem to endorse Hebdige’s position from 1979. The normalisation of certain punk and post-punk aesthetics through these two processes contrasts to the position of my case studies, whose bricolage involves both imagery extremely difficult to commodify by way of its extremity and a subversion of these operations by the actions and attitudes of the artists themselves.

⁹⁹ Hebdige, p. 93.

¹⁰⁰ Hebdige, p. 99.

Hebdige's model is extremely useful in establishing the parameters and theoretical underpinning of the concept of subcultural style, but rather than enact a simple reapplication of his model of subcultural opposition to a punk scene other than his original London context I build upon elements of his theory in relation to each of my case studies. I discuss below how the UK-centric work of Hebdige has been taken, expanded on and developed in order to apply to differing contexts of punk and post-punk production, and the relevance of this to my own project of examining the post-punk polymath.

Post-Subcultures

Both Hebdige's work and the work of CCCS position subcultures as being resistant operations to a hegemonic middle-class cultural structure, expressed through stylistic bricolage and the subversion of symbols. For my own articulation of the subcultural however I favour the model of distinction rather than resistance, one which subcultural theory has largely moved toward since the 1990s. There is some debate around whether this in actual fact marks the shift to the 'post-subcultural' as a new mode of study rather than a continuation. For Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton, this 'reconceptualization' of the field as being post-subcultural is part of an attempt to 'adequately capture the experience of fragmentation, flux and fluidity that is central to contemporary youth culture'.¹⁰¹ Whether this does mark a break

¹⁰¹ Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton, 'What is "Post-subcultural Studies" Anyway?' *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003) pp. 3-23 (p. 3).

with subcultures as they have previously been conceptualised, or simply a development, the key texts from this move are nevertheless extremely significant additions to the analytical framework of subcultural study. Whilst in my research I am referring back to a now historical subculture (post-punk), the model of distinction seems to more accurately reflect the way in which the post-punk polymath operates in relation to its parent (and dominant) culture.

Weinzierl and Muggleton write that what they see as ‘post-subcultural’ theory has two main strands. The first of these rests primarily on the rejection of the theoretical framework of CCCS in favour of analysis grounded in the work of Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Maffesoli. For Weinzierl and Muggleton the ‘application of Butler’s work has led to a growing concern with performativity as a basis for comprehending the ongoing construction of subcultural identities’ through her articulation of the performed nature of identity in the now canonical texts *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993).¹⁰² Butler’s work points to a move beyond the essentialist constructions of subcultural frameworks as seen in the work of CCCS, which feature clearly defined divisions between participants and non-participants. Her comprehensive and persuasive documentation of the performed nature of different identities (primarily sexuality and gender) offers a more nuanced understanding of subcultural participation.

¹⁰² Weinzierl and Muggleton, p. 5.

This performative nature establishes an understanding that participants are always performing their belonging to the scene, constructing identities rather than merely inhabiting them. It reflects Butler's observation in *Gender Trouble* that 'the substantive I only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalise its effects'.¹⁰³ Participants in subcultures perform their identities (Butler's 'substantive I') as members of a subculture, appearing to be concretely participating in all of its aspects because they wish to be identified as doing so. As I have identified, a criticism of CCCS and earlier related subcultural analysis might be that they were too willing to accept subcultural participant's assertions of their own identity as being absolute. The political resistance that punks articulated, for example, may be more performed than a fully thought through or meaningful position. The self-definition of my artistic case studies is also important to consider in relation to their critical and subcultural adoption and acceptance, particularly in Chapter Three.

The use of the work of Pierre Bourdieu to introduce "'taste", "distinction" and "cultural capital" as important concepts for the analysis of youth culture' is perhaps the most important to my work in this thesis.¹⁰⁴ Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) positions cultural capital as a key factor in the positioning of individuals in relation to society alongside economic and social capital, and how that process of positioning then governs the development of acceptable 'tastes'. This concept of tastes reflects the cultural choices and

¹⁰³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.144.

¹⁰⁴ Weinzerl and Muggleton, p. 5.

engagements of different class positions. As Bourdieu writes '[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier', meaning that the individual's positioning of themselves in relation to cultural and artistic materials, and their view of other's relations, can be seen to reflect their class and economic position.¹⁰⁵ He continues by explaining that 'that is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences'.¹⁰⁶

My own analysis draws at several points on what I see as the most significant of the publications to develop Bourdieu's work in relation to subcultures, Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* from 1995. Thornton argues that much of the subcultural studies undertaken before its publication 'have been insufficiently critical of subcultural ideologies', and instead argues that, rather than being examples of generically resistant cultural activity, subcultures are instead 'specific cultural agendas' on the part of the groups themselves.¹⁰⁷ This is how I also see the practices of post-punk polymaths and their refusal of a defined formal artistic identity: as a cultural agenda of distinction from an artistic position that can be uncontroversially contained with institutions (including critical disciplines).

Thornton attempts to demonstrate that subcultures are equally invested, if not more so, in the distinctive qualities of their activities (setting them apart from others, and other rival subcultures) as they are in the potential of their activities to

¹⁰⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Bourdieu, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 10.

resist or change the social system they operate within. For my own research in relation to post-punk, this sense of distinctiveness, of setting yourself apart from the mainstream, is a position far more readily claimed by participants than one of direct political resistance. Thornton also writes that this term (mainstream) is one often misapplied, that 'inconsistent fantasies of the mainstream are rampant in subcultural studies', and that Hebdige and CCCS's model of opposition is one which 'crumbles when applied to historically significant groups'.¹⁰⁸ Thornton suggests that rather than painting an 'omniscient picture of the social organisation – or disorganisation – of youth, I investigate the mainstream as an important feature of the “embodied social structure of youth”'.¹⁰⁹

For Thornton, the fact that subcultural participants position themselves outside of the mainstream is the operative factor, not whether the mainstream is a homogenous and easily definable expression of the bourgeois values of both the parent and dominant culture that the subculture is attempting to subvert. Thornton outlines her argument that subcultural theorists have been insufficiently aware of their own investment in the resistant potential of the artists they discuss, stating that writers like Hebdige simplify 'his mainstream as bourgeois and his subcultural youth as an artistic vanguard'.¹¹⁰ Thornton's work in *Club Cultures* attempts to offer a 'representation of the complex stratifications and mobilities of contemporary youth culture'.¹¹¹ This difference marks the shift towards a model of distinction,

¹⁰⁸ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 93.

¹⁰⁹ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 98.

¹¹⁰ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p.94.

¹¹¹ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 92.

rather than resistance. As I explore in Chapter One through my discussion of New York's Lower East Side punk scene (and the work of Lydia Lunch), those invested in that subculture were far more concerned with establishing a place of freedom outside the influence of their parent culture, and defining themselves apart from it, than they were with a direct political challenge to hegemonic structures. This shift from the classic subcultural model of resistance exemplified by Hebdige and the CCCS scholars also moves the theorisation of subcultures away from the particular social context of late 1970s Britain and to a more responsive and expansive model that can better account for cultural, social and national differences and nuance. The de-emphasis of, for example, the function of an explicit class opposition (which is less applicable to my case study of the bohemian community of late 1970s New York than Hebdige's focus on working-class communities in London at the same time) allows greater significance to be placed on the subcultural participants own perception of their position.

Reflecting this, Thornton writes convincingly of her model that '[d]istinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others,' and proposes her central concept of 'subcultural capital' as a mechanism through which to address this.¹¹² This notion of subcultural capital is articulated by Thornton as the way in which the capital derived from being a recognisable member of a subculture confers 'status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder', embodied in the form of 'being "in the know"'.¹¹³

¹¹² Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p.10.

¹¹³ Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p.11.

It deviates at that point from Bourdieu's cultural capital, which instead spoke to high culture's ability to confer capital upon a recipient in a general sense. Subcultural capital is accrued by participants in Thornton's model through correct and acknowledged participation in the style of a subculture, recognised by other participants. This capital then governs the success and extent of the distinction from others that an individual is able to achieve. The more subcultural capital – signalled by the correct clothes, hair, drug usage, music taste and living situation – the greater the perceived distinction achieved from other groupings.

Thornton suggests that the ability of young people to fulfil their desire to define themselves through subcultural capital rather than cultural capital relates to Bourdieu's argument that a reprieve from necessity allows a 'stylisation of life'.¹¹⁴ This is possible through monetary wealth in Bourdieu's example, but youth in Thornton's, in the sense of young people not needing to expend disposable income on dependents or mortgages, and this allowing a momentary liberation from the pressures of societal expectation. For my own analysis, this point relates interestingly to the ability of artists to create art in a non-disciplinarily confined manner, by the virtue of the subcultural conditions that allowed artists of the post-punk period to live very cheaply in major cities (like New York and LA) whilst still having access to an audience of like-minded individuals. It was the participation in the subculture of these cities, rather than the city itself, that allowed their art practice to achieve any recognition. The confluence of engaged participants and

¹¹⁴ Bourdieu, p.6.

favourable economic conditions is what allows this polymathic artistic activity to flourish, rather than only the economic situation.

The work of Bourdieu, synthesised through Thornton, therefore has a strong impact on my personal articulation of subcultural practices of art throughout this thesis. Butler too, is implicitly relevant in my exploration of the artist's assertions of identity in relation to the subculture of post-punk. The third theorist cited by Weinzierl and Muggleton, Michel Maffesoli, is less immediately relevant to my project, but does offer some useful insights. Maffesoli's work has been deployed in relation to subcultures to establish 'focus on the fluidity of a variety of "tribal" formations', a concept of nebulous, intermingling subcultural groupings that also calls back to the 'drift' of Matza and Sykes.¹¹⁵ Echoing both Hebdige's concept of bricolage in relation to subcultures and the model of distinction that is manifest in Thornton's later work, Maffesoli cites 'specific signs of recognition which have no other goal than to strengthen the small group against the large'.¹¹⁶ Maffesoli's work is less concerned with subcultures but with a philosophical articulation of the multiple ways in which the individual defines themselves within society.

Andrew Bennet is perhaps the best-known theorist to develop Maffesoli's tribal formations in relation to subcultures, in his conception of contemporary club cultures as 'neo-tribes'. Bennet cites Maffesoli's work directly when he argues that 'those groupings which have traditionally been theorised as coherent subcultures

¹¹⁵ Weinzierl and Muggleton, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, trans. by Don Smith (London: Sage, 1996), p. 93.

are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships'.¹¹⁷ Where this work does become relevant to my own is in how both Maffesoli and Butler's influence fosters 'a greater awareness of the idea that there is no 'absolute or universal belonging, but many overlaps and interconnections between these different tribes' as Toshiya Ueno writes.¹¹⁸ Thornton's work too argues for an understanding of the varying degrees of participation possible, rather than just those who are 'in' or 'out' of a subculture.

Alongside the incorporation of the theories of Bourdieu, Butler and Maffesoli, the second main strand of 'post-subcultural' analysis identified by Weinzierl and Muggleton is that which goes 'even further in rejecting outright any possibility of the continuing usefulness of the subculture terminus itself'.¹¹⁹ This strand aims to reconceive subcultures as a whole to reflect better the early twenty-first century, and is consequently less relevant to my own analysis of art practices in the twentieth. This (post-) subcultural work includes the reconfiguring of subcultural groupings as 'channels' or 'subchannels' in the work of Armandeep Singh, 'temporary substream networks' in Weinzierl's own book or Bennet's 'neo-tribes'.¹²⁰ As I have already noted, the disavowal of the term subculture is not one I am

¹¹⁷ Andrew Bennet, 'Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship Between Youth, Style and Musical Taste', *Sociology*, 33 (1999), 599-617 (p. 600).

¹¹⁸ Toshiya Ueno, 'Unlearning to Rave: Techno-Party as the Contact Zone in Trans-Local Formations', in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, pp. 101-117 (p. 108).

¹¹⁹ Weinzierl and Muggleton, pp. 5-6.

¹²⁰ See Bennet, 'Subcultures or Neo-tribes'; Rupert Weinzierl, *Fight the Power: A Secret History of Pop and the Formation of New Substreams* (Vienna: Passagen-Verlag, 2000) and Armandeep Singh, 'Live, Streaming Subculture', *Springerin*, 3:17, <http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=96&lang=de> [accessed 6 December 2016].

particularly interested in sustaining in favour of another neologism, not least because my own research seeks to trace historical aspects of subcultural artistic production rather than new subcultural formations (such as those that take place online), which seems to be the primary rationale for the reframing of the term.

As I am primarily interested in artistic production and activities rather than a purely sociological inquiry into the dynamics of the groups and society, my analysis operates within the dynamics of subcultures themselves, and the experiences of individual participants. Tracing the exact outline of what may be a hazily defined subcultural group is less important to my analysis than understanding the conditions within that group and the benefits and encouragements towards a certain type of artistic activity and career fostered by it. As Furness writes in *Punkademics*, his study of academic participation in punk and post-punk subcultures, there is a danger that some writing risks having less

space devoted to discussing what punks [or other subcultural participants] do, what they think, and why it matters, than the amount of space reserved for debating whether to call them a 'subculture', a 'post-subculture', a 'youth culture', a 'postmodern tribe' or a 'neo-tribe'.¹²¹

Thornton's model of subcultural capital is invaluable in attempting to address this, as it works on the assumption that subcultures are not an objectively definable

¹²¹ Furness, p. 13.

series of relations but ‘a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass’.¹²² It is not the wider effect of post-punk on society that I am interested in defining, but the self-definition of participants and the effects this then has on their artistic production and later critical position. I have therefore embraced the term ‘subculture’ in this thesis, and devoted this space to its proper contextualisation in order to articulate my own position in relation to it, as a contested term that requires nuance in its deployment.

My thesis focuses on punk and post-punk as an amorphous grouping of individuals sharing a particular context, ethos and elements of aesthetic confluence rather than enforcing a strictly policed roster of those who count as post-punk or not. Thornton, Hebdige, elements of the work of the CCCS and the later subcultural investigation specifically devoted to post-punk (Furness, Daniel S. Traber and others) are my main touchstones for later reflection on the subculture and its sociological operations. Drawing on the subcultural frameworks cited above, my analysis investigates how the identification with the punk and post-punk moment affects social and (perhaps most importantly) critical positioning for those artists who were allowed the space or encouraged into a polymathic mode by the particular subcultural environment of the post-punk era. As I now go on to propose in relation to the work of Lydia Lunch, interdisciplinarity and multiple modes of artistic production can be equally as characteristic of a subculture as any one medium. Indeed, as I address in my three

¹²² Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 10.

case studies, post-punk subcultures created environments in which an artist was encouraged to develop a practice that transcended the boundaries of artistic forms, structures of genre and disciplinary boundaries, whilst always remaining sceptical about their own position within critical reflection.

Chapter One – Lydia Lunch and The Lower East Side: Polymaths, Punk and Poverty

The centrepiece of Lydia Lunch's exhibition at Howl! Happening in New York in 2015 was the installation *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home*, which the audience accessed through a curtained partition in the gallery space.¹ Inside the small room, an old bed made-up with crumpled and stained sheets was surrounded by scattered flyers, newspapers and other trash, a typewriter, books, and framed images of saints. A loop of what appeared to be homemade pornography was projected onto the wall above the bed, showing narrowly framed images of buttocks and breasts being whipped and pinched. Scraps of paper with hand-scrawled poetry and first-person prose were stuck haphazardly to the walls alongside large-format photographs of a scarred and tattooed male body, all of which were spattered with fake blood and grime. Over this collage of material, graffiti tags had been sprayed, their large black letters spelling out the phrases 'You Made Me Hate You' and 'I Loved You So Fucking Much'. The smaller text, stuck to and in parts written directly on the white brick walls of the gallery, maintained the same confrontational and obsessive tone as these statements, suggesting an emotional trauma on the part of the author, rife with scatological and aggressively sexual imagery.

This installation, which I attended the opening of during my 2015 research trip to New York, along with several other public events related to the exhibition, embodies many key aspects of Lunch's practice. These include the use of mixed artistic media

¹ Lydia Lunch, *Lydia Lunch: So Real It Hurts*, 8 May 2015 to 5 June 2015, Howl! Happening: An Arturo Vega Project, New York, USA.

(here film, text, collage and found objects, photography and installation) and serial references to obsessive and transgressive sexuality through the text, film loop, and images of the scarred male body. As an artist Lunch claims to be a 'public exhibitionist of my most tortured, personal feelings', and in the implied autobiographical nature of the installation's content *You Are Not Safe In Your Own Home* is a characteristic example of how she presents these feelings to her audience.² It is rough and unpolished in its aesthetic, with an emphasis on collage and implicit citation (books in the room included Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*), and confrontational and uncompromising in its emotional and sexual content.³ This piece directly reflects, in both content and construction, the artistic practice that Lunch developed whilst embedded in the subcultural context of the Lower East Side in the post-punk era of the late 1970s and 1980s. *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home* is deeply reminiscent of Lunch's description of her living situation in her memoir *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary* (1997), where she explains that during this period she would 'construct bizarre set designs' from 'junk scavenged from the trash' in the dilapidated buildings she inhabited for little or no rent.⁴

² Lydia Lunch in Linda M. Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 92.

³ Selby achieved notoriety with his visceral and affective body of novels – most famously the heroin parable *Requiem for a Dream* (1978) and the underbelly noir of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964). *Last Exit to Brooklyn* deals with themes of sexual repression, and is unflinching in its portrayal of domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, implicitly connecting it with the subject of the installation. Lunch also documents her friendship with Selby in several published works. See Lydia Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs* (New York: Akashic Books, 2009), pp. 119-124.

⁴ Lydia Lunch, *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary* (New York: Akashic Books, 1997), p. 42.

I strongly identify Lunch as a polymath within this chapter, an artist whose work occurs across media whilst still remaining a unified practice, and also as an artist awkwardly positioned between academic disciplines and genres of criticism. As a result of the unique artistic environment in which she first began to make work, institutional limits (whether curatorial remits or the delineations of funding streams, for example) have not significantly impacted the development of her practice, artistically or in terms of success and visibility. As I will go on to illustrate, the idiosyncrasies of the post-punk artistic scene in New York inspired (and continue to inspire) her to subvert the compartmentalisation of a traditional career within a single genre or limited number of mediums. As Lunch herself claims, 'Everyone was doing everything. You painted, you were in a band, you made films, you wrote songs'.⁵ I locate Lunch's post-punk polymathy in two main characteristics of her practice: the breadth of art forms she engages with and their intertextual relation; and her intentional convergence of art and life, achieved through a foregrounding of the subjective position she occupies as maker. The independence of Lunch's lifestyle in New York, particularly her residency on the Lower East Side, is directly reflected in her artistic output, and her work exists defined by and in relation to her persona and position within this post-punk scene.

As a case study then, Lunch allows me to explore several aspects of my argument throughout this thesis. After surveying her practice I examine her critical profile, the reflection already afforded her in scholarly and journalistic contexts, in order to

⁵ Lydia Lunch, cited in Marc Masters, *No Wave* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), p. 20.

indicate how the polymathic nature of her practice has not always been explicitly framed or acknowledged, and how this might be unrepresentative of her broader artistic project. I will then explore the Lower East Side scene as an artistic environment, focusing on its economic and cultural context from the late 1970s. This establishes how the unique environment of its post-punk subculture encouraged the operation of subcultural distinction outlined in my introduction, through an artistic practice that operated outside of traditional dynamics of production, dissemination and documentation. I will also demonstrate how the intertextual commitment of Lunch's practice complicates artistic analysis that aims to engage with the actual content of her work, requires an awareness of this influence, and the negotiation of an art/life boundary. These factors, of a polymathic relationship to artistic mediums, of subcultural context, and the blurring of art and life, affect how Lunch is discussed in critical material, referenced in cultural histories, and written about in journalistic representations.

Aspects of Lunch's Practice

Lunch first came to New York in 1976, running away from an abusive home in the Upstate New York town of Rochester at sixteen years old. Her residence in a succession of squats, communal apartments, abandoned industrial buildings and lofts in the vicinity of the Lower East Side is documented in the early passages of *Paradoxia*, after her arrival at the Port Authority Bus Terminal with only 'eighty-two

dollars in my pocket and the phone number of a friend's cousin'.⁶ Lunch remained in the city (aside from touring and short residencies in San Francisco and New Orleans) until she left New York permanently in 1990. Whilst living on the Lower East Side during these fourteen years Lunch was a significant focal point of the post-punk No Wave scene with her bands Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Beirut Slump, and 8-Eyed Spy, a participant in the downtown New Cinema scene and, later, an actor and filmmaker in the Cinema of Transgression. Lunch is emblematic of this period of subcultural expression in the city, which C. Carr defines as 'an era of fashionable heroin, DIY aesthetics, and Super-8 blockbusters starring Lydia Lunch'.⁷

As in the *Capital Improvements* exhibition by Kembra Pfahler (one of Lunch's contemporaries on the Lower East Side and occasional collaborator) referenced in the opening of this thesis, Lunch's installation at Howl! Happening used the representation of a bedroom as a framing mechanism for a retrospective survey of her artistic output across various mediums.⁸ Like Pfahler in London, Lunch grounded her multi-media practice in a domestic context, an assertion of her living situation as it was when she produced most of the other material within the exhibition. This predominantly consisted of posters, albums and archival material from her time working on the Lower East Side. I see this as being indicative of the importance of this subcultural context to Lunch, and to critical approaches to it. The subculture

⁶ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 16.

⁷ C. Carr, 'The Fiery Furnace: Performance in the 80s, War in the 90s', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 49 (2005), 19-28 (p. 21).

⁸ Pfahler and Lunch both performed in films by Richard Kern and Nick Zedd during this period, whilst also sharing venues and social spaces. They continue an artistic association to the present day, with Lunch performing in 2012 as part of Pfahler's Future Feminist collective. See <<http://theholenyc.com/2014/08/15/future-feminism-2/>> [accessed 21 Feb 2017].

that Carr cites Lunch as being characteristic of was a communal environment that allowed artists cheap and easy access to living space, a plethora of potential collaborators in the form of other members of the scene, and small independent venues for performance or exhibition. As Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick write, the environment of the Lower East Side was a 'unique blend of poverty, punk rock, drugs and arson, Hell's Angels, winos, prostitutes and dilapidated housing that adds up to an adventurous avant-garde setting of considerable cachet'.⁹

Importantly, as artist Bibbe Hansen observed during a panel discussion on the enduring influence of No Wave convened around Lunch's exhibition, it was also an artistic scene perceived by its participants to be 'utterly and completely outside the marketplace'.¹⁰ Lunch writes that she viewed New York at this time as 'a giant candy store, meat market, insane asylum, performance stage', a place that offered the 'luxury of anonymity' and allowed her to experiment in both her artistic practice and personal life by making and living outside the cultural conventions of 1970s America.¹¹ Despite her departure from New York in 1990, I contend that even in her later work the Lower East Side is the key environmental and cultural influence on Lunch's practice as an artist, up to and including her most recent projects, and is formative in provoking the polymathic nature of her practice.

⁹ Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, 'Slouching Toward Avenue D', *Art in America*, 72 (1984), 135 – 161 (p. 135).

¹⁰ Bibbe Hansen, at the panel discussion *No Wave Now* with Weasel Walter, Carlo McCormick, Bibbe Hansen, Lydia Lunch and Bob Bert at Howl! Happening, 1 May 2015.

¹¹ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 37.

Lunch continues to produce work in all of the media referenced today, from her most recent musical projects Big Sexy Noise and Retrovirus, to film, television and voiceover roles, visual art, books and commentary.¹² She is also a writer personally and professionally associated in a literary context with confessional, semi-autobiographical and transgressive American literature of the kind seen in the work of Jerry Stahl, Henry Rollins and the previously referenced Selby Jr.¹³ Lunch's artistic practice plumbs similar depths of the human experience, examining her own sexual appetites, personal traumas, violent impulses and the lives of artists, sex workers, drug addicts and social misfits. Alongside this artistic practice and collaboration, Lunch has concurrently worked as a freelance writer and journalist, profiling and interviewing many other artists including Ron Athey, Karen Finley, Jane Handel and graphic novelist Ted McKeever.¹⁴ She has a loose association with performance art, underground comics and installation art as a result.

As Lunch herself claims in relation to artistic self-definition, 'I am a conceptualist.

The concept always comes first, the medium comes second, followed by whomever

I need to collaborate with to achieve that goal'.¹⁵ Lunch is exceptional at locating

¹² Lunch's appearances as an actor include *Bye Bye Blondie*, dir. by Virginie Despentes (Red Star Cinema, 2012) and *Flood Stains*, dir. by Juan Azulay (Matter Management, 2010). Voiceover work includes the role of 'Bub' in *Godkiller: Walk Among Us*, dir. by Matt Pizzolo (Halo-8, 2010) and as the narrator in *Death of the Reel*, dir. by Benjamin Meade (Corticrawl, 2008).

¹³ Stahl achieved notoriety with the publication of his memoir *Permanent Midnight* (1995), which detailed his long-term heroin addiction. Rollins began his career fronting the hardcore punk band Black Flag from 1981 to 1986, before gaining recognition as a spoken-word performer. Lunch has undertaken spoken-word tours with both Rollins and Stahl.

¹⁴ Athey is interviewed in *Will Work for Drugs*, whilst Finley provides the foreword. Lunch collaborated with McKeever on *Toxic Gumbo* (1998), and prefaced the collected edition of his graphic novel *Metropōl* (1995). Handel's installation work is amongst that profiled by Lunch during her time writing for *JUXTAPOZ* magazine in 1995.

¹⁵ Lydia Lunch, cited in Christopher Lee Nutter, 'Legendary No Wave Performer Lydia Lunch Returns to New York with So Real It Hurts at the Howl! Happening Gallery, May 8 to June 5', *The*

herself, through collaboration, association and succession alongside artists with the same ineffable countercultural cache, or what Sarah Thornton identifies as subcultural capital. This frequently takes the form of placing herself in association with a subculturally sound (that is to say, confirms her in this significant subcultural capital) set of influences and comparisons, as in her implied citation of Selby in *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home*. In tandem with this personal subcultural lineage, Lunch also maintains a scepticism towards canons and analysis suggested by those outside the scene. This is a subcultural value shared by many of those artists who developed their practices on the Lower East Side, particularly No Wave musicians, who Michael Azerrad refers to as being 'resolutely ahistorical'.¹⁶

As both Marc Masters and Simon Reynolds document, from 1977 'New Wave' and 'No Wave' emerged from the vacuum left behind when most of the key punk originators (Patti Smith, the Ramones, Richard Hell and Television) became increasingly absent as their success grew and regularly took them away from New York.¹⁷ The moniker No Wave reflects the nihilism and altogether bleaker outlook of the bands, and their sound, which was abstract, abrasive and unconcerned with reference to already existing music. This distinguishes them from the bands now referred to as the New Wave, such as Talking Heads and Blondie, who instead

Huffington Post (US), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-lee-nutter/legendary-no-wave-perform_b_7207394.html> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para. 16 of 27).

¹⁶ Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), p. 238

¹⁷ Other early influential punk bands broke up very quickly after their initial success. The New York Dolls, for example, dissolved acrimoniously in 1977. See Marc Masters, *No Wave* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007) and Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-punk 1978-84* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

strayed from the original punk template by moving towards more musical citation, incorporating influences from pop, world, soul and funk into their music. Lunch's musical work as part of the No Wave scene, which I discuss in more detail below, is usefully demonstrative of her commitment to troubling formal conventions, and of how her investment in the subcultural milieu of the Lower East Side shaped and influenced her later attitude to criticism.

Lunch claims that at this time her goal was to 'never repeat myself and certainly not repeat what had influenced me', a strategy that maps explicitly on to Mark Fisher's marking of innovation as the utmost principle of post-punk.¹⁸ The atonality and confrontational stance of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Lunch's primary No Wave band, was at odds even with most extreme of the original punk bands, who Lunch dismissed as '*too traditional*. It was *too Rock'n'Roll*, and I wasn't interested in that'.¹⁹ In his short article on musical deconstruction (which briefly mentions Lunch) Daniel S. Traber suggests that '[n]one of these performers achieved the financial success of mainstream acts, nor even the recognition that would ensure them a place in the canon of popular rock history'.²⁰ Rather than viewing No Wave as a musical genre, Lunch saw No Wave as an attitude, defined by being 'audience-unfriendly, dissident, contradictory'.²¹ It was an environment where artists worked and collaborated on

¹⁸ Lydia Lunch, cited in Simon Reynolds, *Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews and Overviews* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 144.

¹⁹ Lydia Lunch, *Lydia Lunch: Interviews by V. Vale* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2013), p. 11.

²⁰ Daniel S. Traber, 'Recentring the Listener in Deconstructive Music', *CR: The Centennial Review*, 7 (2007), 165-180 (p. 171).

²¹ Lunch, cited in Dominic Johnson, 'Personality Crisis? Honey, I Was Born with One: Lydia Lunch Interviewed by Dominic Johnson (9/10/14)', *Post-Punk Then and Now*, ed. by Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher (London: Repeater, 2016), pp. 25-56 (p. 35).

projects unburdened by an identification of fidelity to a single medium or set of aesthetic criteria within a particular form. Carlo McCormick references the 'direct link between the visual arts and the social practices of youth at that time [...] an indivisibility of experimental and underground film, graphic art [...] fashion and street styles, performance and guerrilla politics', and Lunch's career as an artist is predicated on a similar indivisibility.²² This indivisibility is key in relation to my positioning of Lunch as a post-punk polymath, and the relationship of her practice to recognition from critics and scholars, which has not always acknowledged it.

The moniker 'No Wave' was itself something of a joke, with the Lower East Side writer Glenn O'Brien suggesting that it paraphrased a quip from film director Claude Chabrol. When referred to as being part of the French New Wave in 1960s cinema, Chabrol replied 'there are no waves, there is only the ocean', leading O'Brien to suggest that No Wave was just as much a repudiation of the existence of a movement as a group identification.²³ Journalists and cultural commentators use the two labels to distinguish the bands and associated figures, but despite the marked difference in style and tone neither No Wave or New Wave were a unified 'movement' in the strictest sense, but loosely affiliated scenes of associated individuals. For Lunch, it is 'only a "movement" in retrospect'.²⁴ Whilst the two

²² Carlo McCormick, 'Out of Bounds: Cultural Synaesthesia and Art in Unexpected Places', in *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years*, ed. by Mark Sladen and Ariella Yedgar (London: Merrell, 2007) pp. 94-99 (p. 95).

²³ Claude Chabrol, cited in Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (Boston: Dutton, 1970), p. 126. O'Brien suggests this quote is the origin of the label No Wave in 'Style Makes the Band', *Artforum*, 38 (October 1999), 132-133 and 168, (p.132). O'Brien misattributes the comment to Jean-Luc Godard.

²⁴ Lunch, cited in Johnson, *Post-Punk Then and Now*, p. 29.

terms serve as a useful shorthand for aesthetic and motivational similarities between bands and artists it is responsible as a scholar to recognise that the existence of No Wave as any kind of coherent movement was and is often now unacknowledged by those now identified by it. James Chance (of the Contortions, a No Wave band), for example, claimed to ‘DESPISE movements! I’d never be part of any movement!’ in an interview from 1978.²⁵ Part of the resistance to seeing No Wave as a musical movement on the part of Lunch and Chance stems, as I suggest throughout this chapter, from the breadth of art forms that participants in the scene on the Lower East Side engaged in, and their related anxiety around being defined by any one form. As Lunch states, in emerging from the Lower East Side, she came out of a movement ‘that was more defined by what it *wasn’t*, than what it was.’²⁶

Jack Sargeant reflects on Lunch’s artistic project as a whole in his introduction to her book of visual artworks, *The Gun is Loaded*, characterising it as:

Simply put: experiment with the medium, push the boundaries, confront the self and the audience, remain authentic to the creative vision, regret nothing, do not debase individual creativity. Her work across film, theatre, spoken word, literature, and fine art maintains these lessons.²⁷

²⁵ James Chance, cited in Roy Trakin, ‘Q: Why Interview James Chance? A: Because He’s There’, *New York Rocker*, January 1979, p. 3.

²⁶ Lunch, *Interviews by V. Vale*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

²⁷ Jack Sargeant, ‘Introduction’, in *Lydia Lunch: The Gun is Loaded*, ed. by Blanche Craig (London: Black Dog, 2008), pp. 6-11 (p. 7).

By defining Lunch's practice by strategy, rather than form, and referencing her visual artwork in the context of the other media she deploys as an artist, Sargeant attempts to acknowledge her various outputs as a single artistic practice, concerned with the same aims and objectives but alternately expressed by concurrent and equal forms. In order to consider her work in a critical context, I argue that an understanding of Lunch's cross-media artistic endeavours requires an appreciation of the unique conditions of production for artists on the Lower East Side in the post-punk period, and of the geographic, social and cultural factors that shaped their work. As I continue, I articulate these factors in relation to Lunch and use them to engage with selected artworks that allow me to demonstrate their interconnectedness. The way to open up Lunch's full practice as a post-punk polymath for close analysis is to read her through the subculture of the Lower East Side – a subculture that placed practices of different media in the same spaces and relied heavily on the audience's awareness and appreciation of the artist's persona and lifestyle, in order to rationalise the changing formal qualities of each aspect of their practice.

Lunch's insistence on contextual and autobiographical specificity challenges the concept of the removed 'practice' of an artist. In this prioritisation of lived experience Lunch's practice bears some relation to Allan Kaprow's notion of 'Avant-garde lifelike art', (as opposed to 'artlike art').²⁸ Kaprow, in his essay 'The Real Experiment' from 1983, specifically references 'postal artists, noise musicians' and

²⁸ Allan Kaprow, *Essays of the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 203

‘performance poets’ as examples of artists whose ‘principal dialogue is not with art but with everything else’, an endeavour that ‘mixes up the traditional art genres or avoids them entirely’.²⁹ Kaprow’s writing, although not directly referring to the Lower East Side, here has a clear relation to my own use of the word polymath to describe these practices. The post-punk polymaths I cite mix up traditional art genres (which could also be identified as artistic forms or mediums) in relation to their unique living situation and subcultural identification against external codifying forces such as the market, genre critics or the tastes and sensibilities of those outside of their milieu.

Lunch’s insistence on contextual and autobiographical specificity similarly challenges both the concept of the removed ‘practice’ of an artist and the ability of an audience to engage and/or appreciate the intertextual nature of her work. As Graham Allen writes, such an intertextuality relies on productions of complex patterns of ‘encoding, re-encoding, allusion, echo, transposing of previous systems and codes’.³⁰ *Paradoxia*, for example, is a key example of this art/life crossover in her practice. The book details several aspects of her life on the Lower East Side, predominantly her sexual experiences after arriving in the city, but is also reflective of other instances of her artistic practice, such as the descriptions of her living situation that correspond to the aesthetic of her installation *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home*. Her descriptions of forming a band in the book also works to frame and indicate her musical work, mythologising its development and original context.

²⁹ Kaprow, p. 203

³⁰ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 169.

The book opens with the warning ‘No names have been changed to protect the innocent. They’re all fucking guilty’, and the implication of a potentially libellous level of confession unequivocally establishes her authorial voice and the presentation of this as a document of Lunch’s life.³¹ This relation to autobiography recalls again Kaprow, who suggests that for those engaging in ‘lifelike art’

The possible boundaries between lifelike art and the rest of life were kept intentionally blurred. Where the art was located, where life was, and when one or the other ‘began’ or ‘ended’ were of no importance. Such distinctions were merely provisional.³²

This concept of lifelike art is deeply reminiscent of Lunch’s practice, which consistently blurs the line between art and life. Kaprow’s characterisation that the maker of ‘artlike art tends to be a specialist’, invested in the mastery of a particular genre or medium, whilst the maker of lifelike art is more often ‘a generalist’, living and creating without an awareness or concern of these considerations, might almost appear to be referring to the concept of the polymath explicitly.³³

Lunch’s Critical Profile

³¹ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 11.

³² Kaprow, p. 206.

³³ Kaprow, p. 201.

Kaprow's articulation of 'lifelike art' in this essay also suggests how such work might be positioned critically, an issue key for my consideration of Lunch, as she is patchily represented in cultural histories, genre criticism and disciplinary canons within the academy. What is particularly lacking in this published material, bar some exceptions identified below, is sustained attention to individual works, and analysis of the intertextual relation between them, her subcultural identification, and autobiographical reporting. I address this oversight by paying close attention to several of Lunch's works in different mediums (writing, music, film and installation) in order to demonstrate their connection and how Lunch's artistic strategies operates across these different forms. Kaprow suggests that '[w]estern art actually has two avant-garde histories: one of artlike art and the other of lifelike art', and that there are particular considerations needed to be given to practices difficult to divide from an artist's general existence.³⁴ This bears a remarkable similarity to Seán Burke's suggestion that 'criticism has been separated into two domains'.³⁵ In his analysis of the role of the author in critical reflection, which I return to later in this chapter, Burke argues that

On the one side, intrinsic and textualist readings are pursued with indifference to the author, on the other, biographical and source studies are undertaken as peripheral (sometimes populist, sometimes narrowly academic) exercises for those who are interested in narrative

³⁴ Kaprow, p. 201.

³⁵ Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 180.

reconstructions of an author's life or the empirical genealogy of his [or her] work.³⁶

Lunch's critical profile suggests how this split might manifest itself in the person of the post-punk polymath. It is divided between journalistic surveys of her life, biographical profiles and interviews and very occasional close analyses of work examined largely in isolation from the rest of her practice. The tension between a formal analysis of techniques and aesthetic qualities and one concerned with more narrative and contextual dimensions of an artist's practice recurs throughout this thesis at several points. The addressing of this split is a central concern of my research, as I seek to develop an understanding of the interrelation between the two in order to better engage critically with the relationship between a subcultural context and a polymathic artistic practice.

Where Lunch maintains her highest level of citation and reference is in the cultural journalism devoted to No Wave, and in documentary histories of the Lower East Side, rather than writing that examines in detail the content or qualities of her actual artistic work. These survey publications and newspaper and magazine articles devoted to particular facets of the Lower East Side scene, such as music or film, make up most instances of reference to Lunch in secondary sources. In recent years writing of this kind devoted to Lunch's Lower East Side milieu as a historical period has increased in frequency, reflecting the critical 'gold rush' on post-punk identified

³⁶ Burke, p. 180.

by Simon Reynolds and referenced in my introduction. The No Wave music scene has now been documented in two recent publications, the previously referenced *No Wave* by Marc Masters, and Thurston Moore and Brian Coley's *No Wave. Post-Punk. Underground. New York. 1976-1980.*, both of which feature Lunch prominently.³⁷ These publications briefly reference the breadth of mediums explored by the artists of the scene, although remain largely concerned with its musical dimension. *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984* and *East Village USA*, catalogue surveys of Lower East Side art at this time (both of which accompanied gallery exhibitions of visual art work from the scene) feature writing from Lunch, but as a result she is positioned as a contributor to the historical overview of the texts rather than an artistic subject in her own right.³⁸ No Wave's musical aspects are profiled in Reynold's *Rip It Up and Start Again*, and Lunch also appears (as cited above) in the companion book of Reynold's research interviews, *Totally Wired: Postpunk Interviews and Overviews*.

The previously referenced Jack Sargeant is one of Lunch's few consistent critical champions, in that he is a recurring authorial presence in exhibition catalogues, liner notes and other published material. Sargeant's introduction to *The Gun is Loaded* referred to above is one of the few examples of analytical reflection that gestures towards the unified nature of her practice across forms, and particularly the manner in which No Wave's post-punk innovation 'informs all of Lunch's subsequent

³⁷ Thurston Moore and Byron Coley, *No Wave: Post-Punk. Underground. New York. 1976-1980.* (New York: Abrams Image, 2008).

³⁸ *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984*, ed. by Marvin J. Taylor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); *East Village USA*, ed. by Dan Cameron, Liza Kirwin and Alan W. Moore (New York: New Museum, 2004).

creative practice'.³⁹ However, as with most other instances of her documentation, in the majority of Sargeant's writing that references Lunch the focus is on a single form of artistic production, as in his *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression*, a survey of the anarchic film movement.⁴⁰ Lunch's participation in the Cinema of Transgression is discussed with only a brief mention of her other artistic work or its influence on this filmic production, which has the effect of limiting her profile within the histories of a particular form.

In 2015 Chuck Kleinhans undertook a short study of Lunch's film collaboration with Richard Kern, *The Right Side of My Brain* from 1985, in the book *Downtown Film and TV Culture*, in which he positions the film, where Lunch has a series of explicit and unsimulated sexual encounters with 'strangers', played by J.G. Thirwell (credited as 'Clint Ruin'), Henry Rollins and others, in relation to narratives of female sexual abjection. Particularly revealing within this analysis is Kleinhans' acknowledgement of the niche 'hipster knowledge' required to understand Lunch's 'performing persona and legend', gesturing towards the subcultural identification and distinction I reference below.⁴¹ My later discussion of Lunch's performance in James Nares' *Rome '78* similarly explores the extent to which 'within her own time and primary audience' she arrived 'with a legend in place', a subculturally constituted identity that frames her performance.⁴² However, whilst Kleinhans places the film within the

³⁹ Sargeant, *The Gun is Loaded*, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁰ Jack Sargeant, *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression* (London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1995).

⁴¹ Chuck Kleinhans, 'Lydia Lunch: The Right Side of My Brain', *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975 -2001*, ed. by Joan Hawkins (London: Intellect, 2015), pp. 99-116 (p. 107).

⁴² Kleinhans, p. 107.

context of Lunch's wider subcultural persona, as he himself acknowledges his focus on the film and the project of the book it is contained within (investigating film and television in the downtown scene), necessarily leads him to neglect 'Lunch's other work, star image and career, which has largely been in the realm of music, writing and spoken-word performance'.⁴³

The historical projects of Reynolds, Moore and Coley, and Masters, in *Rip It Up and Start Again*, *Totally Wired* and the two histories of No Wave are similarly devoted to a particular form (music), meaning that reference to Lunch's other outputs is limited by their scope. While she may appear in histories of musical genres (Reynolds and Masters) or film movements (Sargeant and Kleinhans) the potential for acknowledgement of the significance or the interaction of these various forms in relation to her practice is governed by the formal remit of those texts. The choice to pursue a focus governed largely by medium in these historical surveys is of course valid, but it limits engagement with Lunch's practice that might take into account the specific ways in which her various outputs influence, relate to and develop in relation to each other and the histories they document. No monograph or expansive survey of Lunch's practice across art forms that might address her work as a whole has been published to date to balance this. In offering a broader survey of Lunch's practice, I highlight the potential of an analysis that focuses on the connections of her various artworks to each other as much as to other examples of that particular form or medium. I see this as advocating for the importance of incorporating the

⁴³ Kleinhans, p. 101.

polymathic dimension of her practice into her critical profile alongside her inclusion in histories of individual subcultural mediums, like those of Reynolds or Sargeant.

Lunch does appear in Linda Montano's *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, a collection of interviews compiled by the artist (an approximate contemporary of Lunch), but is otherwise absent from canonical surveys of performance art, such as those published by RoseLee Goldberg. These are texts that are now used comprehensively in the teaching of performance in higher education, and are thus implicitly surveys of artists recognised as being significant to the medium.⁴⁴ Lunch occasionally appears as a tangential reference or contextual figure in journal articles discussing post-punk music and feminist performance art, but, again, with little attention to the actual content of her work.⁴⁵ There are a few exceptions to this however, rare instances where close attention is paid to the actual content and qualities of Lunch's work in order to support wider theoretical conclusions or analysis.

One is Mary Lee Greitzer's article from 2013, a musicological comparison between the presentation of sexual violence through the solo female voice in Lunch's 1984

⁴⁴ See RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), revised and expanded in 2001 and 2011; and *Performance: Live Art since the 60s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), revised and expanded in 2004. Reference to the use of these texts as teaching tools can be seen in Goldberg's NYU staff profile, available at <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/faculty_bios/view/RoseLee_Goldberg> [accessed 18 February 2014].

⁴⁵ See Jeanie Forte, 'Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), 217-235 (p. 234) and Lina Džuverović, 'Twice Erased: The Silencing of Feminisms in *Her Noise*', *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, 20 (2016), 88-95 (p. 89).

monologue 'Daddy Dearest' and Tori Amos's 'Me and A Gun'.⁴⁶ Greitzer explores the solo female voice in relation to sexual violation, and describes 'Daddy Dearest', and Lunch's traumatic descriptions of prepubescent sexual abuse contained within it, as a 'compelling exegesis on the impact of being seduced and abused as a child'.⁴⁷ Greitzer's article represents a rare scholarly analysis of Lunch's practice, particularly one that undertakes a sustained engagement with a single work. Greitzer's analysis places Lunch's monologue in comparison to Amos's acapella song and its narrative of sexual assault, and enacts a structural deconstruction of both in relation to tempo, repeated phrases and narrative arc.

As Greitzer suggests, the poignancy and emotional charge of 'Daddy Dearest' stems from its disturbing imagery and the intensity of Lunch's vocal performance, with Lunch's unaccompanied voice framed as directly addressing her father in the monologue. Although beginning relatively innocently, with Lunch suggesting the recording is a 'little message' to him 'because I guess you haven't heard from me', Lunch proceeds to recall a harrowing narrative of an instance in which she was sexually assaulted by her father as he washed her whilst she stood in the sink of their family home.⁴⁸ Truly horrible images, as when Lunch describes her father's 'filthy, filthy fingers' which 'work their greasy way into my asshole' are made all the more disturbing by Lunch's shift in vocal register from apparent terror to a knowing

⁴⁶ Mary Lee Greitzer, 'Queer Responses to Sexual Trauma: The Voices of Tori Amos' "Me and A Gun" and Lydia Lunch's "Daddy Dearest"', *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, 17 (2013), 1-26.

⁴⁷ Greitzer, p. 25

⁴⁸ Lydia Lunch, 'Daddy Dearest', *Uncensored/Oral Fixation* (Atavistic Records, 1996). My own transcription.

sultriness.⁴⁹ In the monologue, Lunch narrates the complicated relationship of guilt and culpability she felt as the victim of her father's assault, particularly in relation to her sexual excitement at his touch. Lunch declares that this abuse provoked a 'hatred for the whole human race' that precluded her ever having 'a normal relationship'.⁵⁰ The piece ends with a repeated anguished cry of 'I hate you!', coupled with choking sobs from Lunch.⁵¹ As Greitzer writes 'the use of solo voice seems to distil the artist's message, enhancing our sense of each narrative as personal, "authentic", autobiographical'.⁵²

Greitzer's analysis of Lunch's 'Daddy Dearest' is an example of the manner in which the post-punk polymath offers a difficult prospect for a disciplinarily focused critical analysis. Occurring within the frame of musicology, it is limited to the extent to which it engages with the piece in relation to other, non-musical, instances of Lunch's work. Greitzer acknowledges that Lunch produces 'confrontational fringe/underground art in numerous media', but remains focused on 'Daddy Dearest' as a discrete piece of recorded audio.⁵³ It does not engage with the live performances of 'Daddy Dearest' that Lunch undertook in clubs and other performance spaces, or the correlations between it and other examples of Lunch's practice. This is not to say that Greitzer's article is somehow lacking, as it is in fact it is one of the few examples of a detailed close reading of Lunch's actual work (rather than her as a figure) in a scholarly context. However, in approaching Lunch as a

⁴⁹ Lunch, 'Daddy Dearest'.

⁵⁰ Lunch, 'Daddy Dearest'.

⁵¹ Lunch, 'Daddy Dearest'.

⁵² Greitzer, p. 6

⁵³ Greitzer, p. 16.

post-punk polymath, considering her use of different media to pursue the same blurring of an art practice and subcultural lifestyle, new insights into her artistic strategies, including Lunch's voice as a victim of sexual abuse in relation to 'Daddy Dearest' (the investigation of which is Greitzer's project) are usefully brought forward.

What if, whilst maintaining Greitzer's focus on close analysis of a single piece of work, a comparison was undertaken that was not only between 'Daddy Dearest' and 'Me and A Gun', another performance by a female vocalist and songwriter, but also between 'Daddy Dearest', *Paradoxia* and other examples of Lunch's own practice? This would move away from a strictly musicological analysis, and instead position Lunch in relation to other facets of her own work. It would recognise that, for example, Lunch's presentation of herself as a victim of domestic abuse would be contextually enriched by an awareness of how this factor has surfaced in other artworks. In *Paradoxia*, for example, Lunch discusses how she is 'so twisted by men, a man, my father, that I became like one'.⁵⁴ This seems directly analogous to her lyric in 'Daddy Dearest' that her father's abuse was 'putting in place of ME YOU', that her father's nature overtook her own as a result of his assault.⁵⁵

The detailed and graphic descriptions of random sexual encounters in *Paradoxia* are also framed by Lunch as the result of her 'sexual horizon' being 'overstimulated by a father who had no control', and indeed use similar language and phrasing to

⁵⁴ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Lunch, 'Daddy Dearest'.

describe them.⁵⁶ Lunch rehearses similar sexual situations to those outlined in 'Daddy Dearest', the recurring image of being bent over and touched or licked from behind reoccurring in her description of sex with Sal in *Paradoxia*, who buries 'his face in it' causing her to 'pull away'.⁵⁷ Reading this description in tandem with 'Daddy Dearest' raises uncomfortable spectres of Lunch's description of her father and his tongue 'slippin' between my legs' during the assault.⁵⁸ The parallel between these two pieces of work highlights the critical potential of positioning Lunch's work in relation to both the biographical detail she shares and instances of her work from distinct mediums that explore related themes.

Lunch's film performances too, particularly in Richard Kern's *Fingered* (1988), stage a similarly transgressive negotiation of sexual excitement and victimhood.⁵⁹ Lunch's role in the film is that of a phone sex operator who takes off on a road trip with one of her clients, indulging in graphic sex acts and violence (also often unsimulated). Lunch, whose character is unnamed and thus implicitly a version of herself, at one point invites her co-performer, Marty Nation, to bend her over and insert his fingers into her from behind, followed by the barrel of a gun in an ambiguously framed scene of sexual intercourse/rape on the hood of the car. This violation from behind is an image reminiscent again of 'Daddy Dearest', and Lunch's claim that she 'made those films in order to try and deal with and understand the whole psychology behind the Victim' is the parallel of what Greitzer's article suggests is Lunch's

⁵⁶ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Lunch, 'Daddy Dearest'.

⁵⁹ *Fingered*, dir. by Richard Kern (Deathtrip Films, 1988).

strategy in 'Daddy Dearest'.⁶⁰ Even in this short comparison then, the idea that Lunch's practice negotiates similar themes and strategies across mediums, and has an emotional potential deriving from being framed within the 'seemingly autobiographical' is prevalent.⁶¹

The focus on a single aspect of her polymathic practice might also lead to readings that seem less secure when placed in the context of Lunch's wider production. Dan Graham's short essay 'Semio-Sex: New Wave Rock and the Feminine', for example, appeared in *LIVE* magazine in 1982, a magazine of performance analysis published alongside *PAJ* journal.⁶² In it Graham discusses Lunch's live performances with her band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks in relation to Julia Kristeva's theories of 'semiotic chora', her use of 'shifting and heterogeneous impulses and feelings of the body' to 'subvert the logical and ego-centric categories of social speech'.⁶³ Graham suggests that Lunch's fierceness in performance 'serves as a defense to disassociate her conscious person from the jouissance which the music exposes'.⁶⁴ Graham's focus on a singular aspect of Lunch's work here (her performances with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks) leads him to suggest that her stillness and rigidity in live performances with the band is specifically designed to 'not open itself for communication or autobiographical speculation'.⁶⁵ However, I would argue that an

⁶⁰ Lunch, cited in Duane Davis, 'Lydia Lunch: Punishment of the Rose', in Sargeant, *Deathtripping*, pp. 177-184 (p. 180).

⁶¹ Greitzer, p. 17.

⁶² Further information about *LIVE* magazine and its relationship to *PAJ* Journal can be seen at <<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/live>> [accessed 15 March 2017].

⁶³ Graham, p. 15.

⁶⁴ Graham, p. 16.

⁶⁵ Graham, p. 16.

analysis that took into account the other work that Lunch was producing at this point in a non-musical context (such as her monologue work, including 'Daddy Dearest', which was being performed live before 1982 and its recorded release in 1984) the suggestion that Lunch seeks to occlude autobiographical readings might have been less definitive.

As I examine further below, the performance style and lyrics of *Teenage Jesus and the Jerks* could actually be convincingly read as being positioned by Lunch to directly reflect her autobiography and a subcultural attempt to distinguish herself from wider culture. While Graham suggests Lunch and other female post-punk performers strike a pose that does not necessitate a 'belief in their persona and private lives', I would argue that, in the case of Lunch specifically, the audience's 'belief' in her persona is a key aspect of her artistic identity when also considering her film performances, spoken-word monologues and writing.⁶⁶ Below, I discuss how Lunch's performances in *Teenage Jesus and the Jerks* and in *Rome '78* are exactly the kind of pose of 'dramatic quasi-fiction, intended as a hook upon which to hang the song's narrative I' that Graham suggests performers such as Lunch view as 'dubious or unnecessary'.⁶⁷ Again, I do not mean this as a particular criticism of Graham, who is attempting to make a wider point with reference to a specific piece of Lunch's work, in the context of a discussion of other female punk performers. Rather, it is an example of the way in which fragmented instances of analysis of only one instance of Lunch's practice, particularly in academic or scholarly contexts, is

⁶⁶ Graham, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Graham, p. 17.

problematically limited if it is not also complemented by examinations of her work that engage with it as a unified practice in relation to its particular context of production.

Aside from the instances already referenced, the most represented form of published reflection devoted to Lunch and her work takes the form of interviews. This no doubt reflects the pleasure of her inimitable style of address, and the confrontational manner in which she articulates her artistic strategies and mythologises her extreme personal history. Lunch was a regular interviewee even as a teenager, appearing in Xeroxed fanzines and independent publications such as *X*, *New York Rocker* and *Artrock* from the late 1970s. Lunch continues to be interviewed by music blogs and magazines today, occasionally also appearing in publications with a more mainstream audience, such as *Vice* magazine, the *Huffington Post*, the *Guardian*, and *Rolling Stone*, usually to promote a tour or new project.⁶⁸ Many of these journalistic interviews feature Lunch answering similar questions, usually in relation to the biographic detail I highlight in my introduction to this chapter, with apparently rote answers. A good example of this repetition is her oft-repeated story of beating her bandmates in Teenage Jesus and the Jerks with a coat hanger if they made mistakes in rehearsal.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Listing all of Lunch's appearances in interview would be impractical and of limited significance, both as a result of the number and their often-repetitive content. I do however reference several selected interviews more fully below.

⁶⁹ Lunch repeats this anecdote in almost identical phrasing in Reynolds's *Totally Wired*, p. 146, as in interviews with *VICE*, *LA Record*, *Trebuchet*, *The Daily Swarm*, *Brooklyn Vegan*, *Bedford and Bowery* and others.

More expansive and detailed interviews with Lunch have begun to appear since the release of Moore and Coley's *No Wave* history in 2008, which seems to reflect the increased interest in the scene and the turn towards post-punk as a subject of historical excavation. In 2013 RE/search publications (devoted to subcultural documentation and advocacy) published *Lydia Lunch: Interviews by V. Vale*, a small pocket book of interviews conducted by the founder of the press. Lunch was also interviewed by Dominic Johnson as part of a live event for the *Post-Punk Then and Now* series at Goldsmiths University in 2014 with the transcribed interview included in the later publication documenting the series. Both provide longer, more detailed engagements with Lunch as an interview subject in relation to her biography, self-definition as an artist, attitude and personal philosophy, and provide useful material for my discussion below by building on the body of journalistic interviews that already exists.

It is important to note that Black Dog (who published Master's *No Wave* and *The Gun is Loaded*), Repeater (who published *Post-Punk Then and Now*) and RE/search are all publishing imprints which are committed to the promotion of lesser known or subculturally resonant material, in order to provide a 'fresh, eclectic take on contemporary culture'.⁷⁰ As Repeater state, this involves bringing 'marginal, esoteric, idiosyncratic and necessary literature and thought into a mainstream that would ignore it'.⁷¹ The vast majority of published material engaging with Lunch not

⁷⁰ Black Dog Publishing, 'About Us', <<http://www.blackdogonline.com/new-page-1/>> [accessed 21 February 2017] (para. 1 of 4).

⁷¹ Repeater Books, 'Home', <<http://repeaterbooks.com>> [accessed 21 February 2017] (para. 1 of 2).

limited to journalistic goals then is disseminated by presses attempting to remedy or provide an alternative to established narratives of culture, a fact that itself suggests that she is still a marginal proposition and an artist who has been underrepresented in scholarship and criticism to date.

Although Lunch has arguably increased her profile through the recent publications cited above and the enhanced archival potential of the Internet, she is still without the recognition or reflection afforded other artists of her generation and longevity. As Tanya Pearson notes in the catalogue which accompanied *So Real It Hurts* (which was Lunch's first partially retrospective exhibition in the US):

Lydia Lunch deserves to be more than a footnote in rock journalism, history and scholarship. [...] Acknowledgements in the form of reissued records, films and career retrospectives are a step in the right direction. [...] It's not about fame. It's about being aware of whose shoulders we're standing on constructing a new narrative and a more-inclusive history.⁷²

Pearson suggests here that Lunch's underrepresentation as an artistic subject is problematic from a point of view of establishing 'more-inclusive' histories beyond the same canon of important artists, a charge which also resonates with my project of expanding the narrow roster of artists considered in detail in relation to post-punk. Pearson suggests that documents of 'music, culture and subculture' are

⁷² Tanya Pearson, 'More Than Just a Footnote', *Lydia Lunch: So Real It Hurts*, ed. by Susan Martin and Ted Riederer (New York: Howl! A/P/E) pp. 40-41 (p. 41).

‘completely devoid of women, aside from the usual figureheads’, for example, and that Lunch’s marginality in rock and other cultural histories may be partially a result of her gender.⁷³ This point echoes the one made by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber in their essay in *Resistance Through Rituals*, referenced in my introduction, where they suggest that female subcultural participation has been consistently underplayed. As Maria Raha writes in her study of female musicians, ‘this gender discrimination reduces real revolutions by women in punk and indie rock to a faint echo’.⁷⁴

Lunch’s unapologetically aggressive female sexuality, representations of extreme and transgressive violence, and her contrarian approach to critical reflection on her own practice may indeed suggest a reason for the fact that Lunch’s *work* is rarely examined in detail, particularly in journalism and mainstream cultural history meant to be accessible for a wider audience. Detailed expositions of abusive relationships and violence are characteristic of her practice across all mediums, which as Raha suggests in her short reflection on Lunch, can ‘make her work uncomfortable, especially as she deals in conversational taboos – self-revelation, abuse, profanity, unrelenting female anger, and forthright desire’.⁷⁵ Lunch herself also discusses the anxiety around a woman presenting her own desires and darkest thoughts in an uncompromising manner in an earlier interview with V. Vale and Andrea Juno

⁷³ Pearson, p. 41.

⁷⁴ Maria Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2005), p. xv.

⁷⁵ Raha, p. 123.

published in RE/search's *Angry Women*.⁷⁶ Lunch suggests that the insistence on autobiographical identification with her work, her blurring of art and life, pose a challenge to later reflection, that the walls come 'crashing down whenever a heavy emotional confrontation might threaten to force some deeper communication'.⁷⁷ This reflects Raha's argument that once women 'go "too far" or get "too angry" [...] the subculture tends to shun them'.⁷⁸ The brief reference to Lunch as a figure in survey histories without detailed description of her work echoes this, the extremity of her expression and the necessity of autobiographical framing of her work deferred in favour of a brief acknowledgement of significance without reflection on content.

Lucy O'Brien suggests that in response women artists 'often relied on a fierce sense of individuality to buttress themselves', as Lunch does in her insistence on the specificity of her production, and its relation to her autobiography and personal experience.⁷⁹ Indeed for Pearson, Lunch's practice covering 'various mediums' remains relevant 'because it's the truth', suggesting that for her the reading of Lunch's process of elision of the boundary between art and life is a unifying factor in her practice as a post-punk polymath.⁸⁰ This is important in relation to more narrowly focused analyses of Lunch because, as Pearson suggests, 'motives and perspective are the things that get left out' when No Wave is 'reduced to style and

⁷⁶ Andrea Juno and V. Vale, 'Lydia Lunch [Interview]', *Angry Women*, ed. by Andrea Juno and V. Vale (New York: RE/Search and Juno Books, 1991), pp. 105-117 (p. 108).

⁷⁷ Lunch, cited in Juno and Vale, p. 109.

⁷⁸ Raha, p. xv.

⁷⁹ Lucy O'Brien, 'The Woman Punk Made Me', *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. by Roger Sabin (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 186-198 (p. 195).

⁸⁰ Pearson, p. 41.

popularity’.⁸¹ In my discussion of Lunch’s practice, I avoid this by articulating her practice in relation to her motivations and perspectives on it, as well as to my reading of specific works, their context of reception and their significance within a polymathic practice shaped by a post-punk subculture.

In proposing the concept of the post-punk polymath, I suggest a third option in relation to Burke and Kaprow’s articulation of the divide in criticism: a recognition that close attention to individual art works should be pursued alongside an articulation of biographical context and influence, as the conditions and framing of a subcultural lifestyle shape both form and content across mediums. The work of the post-punk polymath across art forms is a practice made up of texts that, as Burke describes, ‘incorporates the (auto)biographical as part of its dramaturgy’, texts that stage themselves ‘within a biographical scene’.⁸² In the case of Lunch’s practice, her investment in an elision of the boundary between art and life (or lifelike art, as Kaprow refers to it) causes her to merge ‘with the artwork and those who participate in it’, her audience and the subculture it emerges from.⁸³

New York and the Lower East Side

So far in this chapter I have highlighted the breadth of Lunch’s practice, and emphasised the importance of contextual specificity in engaging with her practice. In order to enact this specificity in my own analysis, I have claimed that the Lower

⁸¹ Pearson, p. 41.

⁸² Burke, p. 180.

⁸³ Kaprow, p. 211.

East Side represented a unique subcultural environment for the development of Lunch and other's artistic practice, and I will now clarify both what was unique about New York at this particular historical moment, and how that environment encouraged her practice of post-punk polymathy. Simply put, I argue that the development of the post-punk subculture on the Lower East Side, and its characteristic artistic production unbounded by form or media was a result of economic, social and demographic changes in New York in the second half of the twentieth century. As in both Lunch and Pfahler's installations (domestic settings that explicitly call back to their everyday life as artists on the Lower East Side), the deprivations and aesthetic qualities of their living situation influenced the content of their work, just as the artistic infrastructure the artists developed there influenced their dismissal of formal concerns of artistic medium. On the Lower East Side, post-punk polymaths were both characteristic of their environment and provoked to make work across artistic mediums by their subcultural investment in it as a space of possibility. Lunch, taking her first steps as an artist within the scene, shapes – as she is in turn shaped by – the subculture's inclinations and conventions. It is important to establish this context because, as Sarah Thornton writes in *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, 'the process by which subcultures crystallize is crucial to understanding their meaning'.⁸⁴

After New York's post-World War II boom, de-industrialisation and increased social mobility led to 'white flight' (white middle class relocation) from the central

⁸⁴ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), p. 152.

metropolitan areas, which began a period of decline throughout the late 1950s and 60s that eventually brought the city to the brink of public bankruptcy in the 1970s.⁸⁵ Almost a million fewer people were living in the city in 1980 than in 1950, and business and property prices were at an all-time low.⁸⁶ Marshall Berman cites 1966 as the beginning of the most dramatic period of the city's economic decline, specifically the point at which the 'Port Authority of New York and New Jersey decided to close most of the docks and terminals around Manhattan [...] [which] had nourished a whole complex of satellite industries'.⁸⁷ This was compounded by the refusal of President Ford to consider bailing out the city in 1975, a decision which prompted the infamous *Daily News* headline 'Ford to City: Drop Dead', and serves as a clear example of how far New York's decline had taken root in the public consciousness by the 1970s.⁸⁸ According to Joanne Reitano:

A startling conglomeration of ills confirmed New York's image as the worst of all possible worlds. Rampant arson, ravaging disease, surging welfare roles, high unemployment, untrammelled drug use, brazen crime, filthy streets, sprawling graffiti, crumbling schools, huge rats, extensive homelessness, fiscal bankruptcy, police corruption, and political scandals horrified the

⁸⁵ 'White Flight' is defined as 'movement to the suburbs by middle-class households from the majority white population supposedly in reaction to the growing demands and presence of racial and ethnic minorities in city centres, and the related fears about crime and schooling' by Noel Castree, Rob Kitchin and Alisdair Roberts in *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 561.

⁸⁶ Alan G. Hevesi, *Population Trends in New York State's Cities*, Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2004, <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/research/pop_trends.pdf> [accessed 4 May 2017], p. 7.

⁸⁷ Marshall Berman, 'Introduction', *New York Calling: From Blackout to Bloomberg*, ed. by Marshall Berman and Brian Berger (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), pp. 9-38 (p. 17).

⁸⁸ William J. Brink, 'Ford to City: Drop Dead', *Daily News*, 29 October 1975, p. 1.

nation. Gotham [New York] epitomized the problems everyone else hoped to avoid. It symbolized the urban crisis.⁸⁹

However, the cheap rents and abundant space offered by this urban crisis also allowed new artistic communities to take root. The promise of freedom, the bohemian pedigree and unique environment of the city (and the Lower East Side in particular) attracted artists, misfits and oddballs, from runaways like Lunch to art school graduates and wannabe poets. This migration brought many subsequently culturally significant figures to the city, including musicians and writers Patti Smith and Richard Hell, photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin, filmmakers Jim Jarmusch and Amos Poe, and the constituent band members of Talking Heads, Blondie, Mars, The Contortions, Television, Bush Tetras, DNA, Sonic Youth, Swans and many others.

Although the boundaries denoted by the term Lower East Side have changed over the intervening decades, and various areas within it renamed by successive waves of immigration and gentrification, it is roughly located between the Bowery and the East River on the eastern edge of the island of Manhattan, with 14th Street as its northern boundary. This wide and somewhat fluid geographical definition of the Lower East Side reflects the artist and musician Jeffery Lewis's comment that, despite the distinctions that could be drawn between Alphabet City, the East Village, Loissaida and other areas, whilst he was growing up in the area in the late 1970s and

⁸⁹ Joanne Reitano, *The Restless City: A Short History of New York from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 181.

1980s 'We just called it the Lower East Side [...] That's what my parents called it, that's what everyone called it'.⁹⁰

Neil Smith, Betsy Duncan and Laura Reid note that the area was always 'Bohemian' as a result of both the diversity engendered by mass immigration and the artistic vibrancy of these new communities, as exemplified by the Yiddish Theatre of Jewish émigrés in the 1920s.⁹¹ The area had also briefly been the centre of the hippie movement on the East Coast in the mid-1960s, although this was a subculture that rapidly dissipated as its utopian ideal shifted towards the rural space of the commune. Crucially, according to Christopher Mele, during the latter end of the 20th century new artistic migrants coming to the Lower East Side formed successive '[s]ubcultures, whose identity, social practices and rituals intentionally embraced and espoused cultural difference', from the 'beats in the 1950s, the punks in the 1970s, to the queer subculture in the 1980s'.⁹² This process of artistic immigration and innovation would begin to tail off in the late 1980s as gentrification took hold and the AIDS crisis decimated the city and its communities, particularly male homosexuals and intravenous drug users, both of which were groups significantly represented on the Lower East Side at the time.

⁹⁰ Jeffery Lewis cited in Mischa Pearlman, 'Meet Me in the City: Jeffery Lewis's Lower East Side', *Flood Magazine*, 12 December 2015, <<http://floodmagazine.com/28717/meet-me-in-the-city-jeffrey-lewis-lower-east-side/>> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para. 2 of 26).

⁹¹ Neil Smith, Betsy Duncan and Laura Reid, 'From Disinvestment to Reinvestment', in *From Urban Village to East Village*, ed. by Janet Abu-Lughod (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 149-167 (pp. 155-156).

⁹² Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 26.

The urban context of the Lower East Side provided a way for otherwise economically marginal artists to sustain their practice through the social and cultural support of the subcultures that developed. These subcultures produced and nurtured artists and art works that existed independently of markets and the formal and moral constraints of their parent culture. As Thomas Bender writes, 'New York does not fit easily [with] the dominant notions of the meaning of America', and particularly in the context of what Reitano references above, residency in the city in the late 1970s was a powerful rejection of the cultural status quo.⁹³ Luc Sante (arriving as an aspirational writer in the 1970s) remembers that for those moving to the city during the post-punk period, 'material deprivation was not much of a sacrifice, considering that the payoff was independence from the social and cultural mainstream'.⁹⁴ Lunch remembers that she was thrilled to be 'rubbing up against the freaks and outcasts' and 'didn't give a flying fuck if the Bowery smelled like dog shit'.⁹⁵

This is not to suggest that despite its municipal problems New York did not already have a functioning cultural industry. New York had emerged as the centre of the international art market in the post-WWII period, 'shifting the cultural centre of the West from Paris to New York' through the international success of Abstract Expressionism and (later) Pop Art.⁹⁶ In the 1970s this industry was centred around the galleries of the Upper East Side and Chelsea, 'uptown' institutions of

⁹³ Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Area* (New York: New Press, 2002), pp. 185-186.

⁹⁴ Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (London: Granta, 1998), p. xv.

⁹⁵ Lunch, cited in Moore and Coley, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 11.

professional dealers and publicists, thoroughly invested in the financial side of art production and devoted to marketing the bohemianism of the artists (who lived all over the city) and abstract and conceptual art works that had previously seemed to question the foundation of the existing art market. As Lucy Lippard wrote in 1973, hopes that the innovations of conceptual art would 'be able to avoid the general commercialisation, the destructively "progressive" approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded' as the market absorbed the innovations of the sixties.⁹⁷

Certain artists and venues provided the nexus point of this commercial interaction, such as Andy Warhol's 'Silver Factory' workshop, which Steve Watson argues had 'provided an extraordinary point of Sixties intersection. (Only Max's Kansas City connected Uptown and Downtown so broadly)'.⁹⁸ As the market value of the work of Warhol, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and others went up, and New York became further entrenched as the world's centre of artistic commerce (despite the development of the city's other difficulties) this commercial dimension appeared in some cases to overtake the artistic. As Watson later writes, 'by 1970 [the Factory] was not an art space but a commercial space'.⁹⁹ Whether or not this is an entirely fair assessment, the perception of 'uptown' and the art world as a bloated and cynical commercial sector was extremely prevalent amongst the young artists of the Lower East Side. Lunch cites Warhol as a 'celebrity of death', exploiting the

⁹⁷ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 263

⁹⁸ Steve Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), p. xv.

⁹⁹ Watson, p. 411

underground and its true denizens for commercial gain.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, Lunch argues her generation of artists used

music and art as a battering ram and a form of psychic self-defense against our own naturally violent tendencies, an extreme reaction against everything the 1960s had promised but failed to deliver.¹⁰¹

As Lippard writes it was always going to be difficult for artists in New York to resist this 'gallery-money-power structure', one that she saw as 'so strong that it's going to be very difficult to find a viable alternative to it'.¹⁰² It was on the Lower East Side, however, that the new artists arriving in the city during the late 1970s did attempt to develop a parallel network of local production and dissemination to this already existing industry. Of course, the distinction between the downtown scene and the uptown art world is not absolute, and it is equally worth acknowledging that aspects of the downtown scene certainly did eventually succumb to the incorporation outlined by Lippard, a point I return to in my discussion of David Wojnarowicz in Chapter Two.

Rather than attempt to judge whether the perception of the uptown art world as inherently compromised by finance is accurate or fair, my focus is instead on how that perception contributed to a subcultural mind-set that then provoked the

¹⁰⁰ Lydia Lunch, 'No Wave Now' public panel discussion, Howl! Happening Gallery, New York, 17 May 2015.

¹⁰¹ Lydia Lunch, 'No Wave Now', in *Lydia Lunch: So Real It Hurts*, pp. 8-9 (p. 9).

¹⁰² Lippard, p. 9.

downtown practices I am discussing. Certainly for many downtown artists it was not until the East Village art scene in the mid-1980s, also discussed in Chapter Two, that access to the mechanisms of the already existing art world in New York seemed possible to the kinds of art being made by those working within the Lower East Side scene. For many downtown figures this access, when it did arrive, signified the colonisation of the artistic milieu by financial interests.¹⁰³ The artists of the Lower East Side in the post-punk period (which, as I have already identified is approximately 1978-85) prided themselves on their differentiation from uptown's perceived commercialism, and was emphatic about their independence and differing priorities. This alternative attitude, in the sense of providing a literal alternative to bourgeois middle-class taste, is important in understanding the motivations of the artists on the Lower East Side at this time. The Lower East Side attempted to establish itself as the environment in which something distinct was occurring from the post-punk scene's *perception* of the uptown world of Warhol and others. As Dick Hebdige suggests, such perceptions 'function as signs, as elements in communication systems', and those living and working on the Lower East Side used their dismissal of the uptown art world as a sign of their independence, and as a key aspect of their subcultural distinction.¹⁰⁴

An Autonomous Zone

¹⁰³ See Sylèvre Lotringer, 'David West [Interview]', *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, ed. by Giancarlo Ambrosino (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), pp. 91-95

¹⁰⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 13.

As Bibbe Hansen's comment cited earlier in this chapter suggests, it is also important to acknowledge that without the influence of any commercially significant market for the art, funding requirements or large-scale institutional agendas, art on the Lower East Side in the late 1970s and early 1980s was created for and amongst a supportive (yet interpersonally competitive), self-contained peer group outside the market that Lippard discusses. Indeed, as Steven Willats writes in relation to punk and post-punk practices more generally, as 'an art practice that sets out to deny the authority and relevance of the established art institutions [it] was unlikely to get much support from them'.¹⁰⁵ Thus low living costs of the area allowed a level of independence unavailable elsewhere, and the valorisation of this independence further reinforced the work's isolation. This independence is a perhaps more extreme version of the cultural freedom the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identified as being usually only enjoyed by the bourgeoisie, unavailable to most due to the tension lying in the 'opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity'.¹⁰⁶

In this Bourdieu refers to the fact that cultural preoccupations (food, entertainment, etc.) develop in accordance to the level of necessity of various members of society. The bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie, having more financial resources and thus being less motivated by necessity, are able to devote more time to esoteric cultural pursuits. More experimentation is possible when the value or success of culture is

¹⁰⁵ Steven Willats, 'Intervention and Audience', *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years*, pp. 192-197 (p. 194).

¹⁰⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 173.

less of a pressing concern, as it might be if your opportunities for cultural engagement are severely limited by the necessity of working a time or physically intensive job. Simply put, those with a less pressing practical and financial situation are able to engage with more varied forms of culture, both as audiences and, as I would argue, as makers themselves.

Bourdieu's notion is expanded on in relation to British youth subcultures by Thornton in *Club Cultures*. For Thornton, the freedom enjoyed by young people translates into a similar opportunity for (sub)cultural engagement, although one that 'does not mean the youth have wealth so much as that they are exempt from the adult commitments to the accumulation of economic capital'.¹⁰⁷ In Thornton's description of British clubbers, young people are free to 'spend on goods like clothes, music, drink and drugs' as a result of being free of 'adult overheads like mortgages and insurance policies'.¹⁰⁸ Their reprieve from necessity therefore resides not in a high level of wealth but a low level of financial demand, creating a similar financial surplus as enjoyed by the bourgeoisie but from a lack of demand rather than abundance of supply.

In the case of those living on the Lower East Side in the late 1970s, the reprieve from the everyday requirements of 'adult' expenditure by way of their living situation in the city allowed artists to devote time and money to their art (as well as the partying Thornton references) without concerns over its ability to fulfil the

¹⁰⁷ Thornton, p. 103.

¹⁰⁸ Thornton, pp. 102-103.

necessities of living, as that level of necessity was so low. Lunch's own reflections on her living situation confirm this:

Work? Are you nuts? Please. \$75 per month – that was my rent when I got an apartment on 12th Street. You could eat for two or three dollars a day. You begged, borrowed, stole, sold drugs, worked a couple of days at a titty bar if you had to. [...] [It] didn't take much.¹⁰⁹

The Lower East Side offered an autonomous zone, where conventional requirements of economic and artistic production such as selling work, maintaining audiences or securing funding were not essential for survival. In the economically depressed areas of New York then, artists developing their practice were largely exempt from the governing economic systems of the art market, music industry and mainstream cinema that might have otherwise exerted an influence on their production. This allowed not only the opportunity to engage in artistic production across multiple mediums, but to abandon the formal conventions that governed their usual production.

Lunch and the No Wave were concerned with innovation, achieved through improvisation and collaboration across art forms and deeply rooted in their unique residential environment. Traber describes No Wave music as being characterised by 'disharmony, irregular tunings, static, sparseness, unmelodic and/or atonal vocals

¹⁰⁹ Lydia Lunch cited in Masters, p. 18.

[...] repetitive single-beat rhythms and single-note chords that were distorted into thudding white noise and drones.¹¹⁰ This accurately describes Lunch's band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, in which she played heavily distorted slide guitar using whatever was at hand, whether a 'slide, a knife, [or] a beer bottle', as it precluded her learning chords, which she saw as being 'used to death'.¹¹¹ Lunch's vocal performance typically involved screaming the words to a sparse and repetitive melody, as can be heard on the track *I Woke Up Dreaming*, recorded for the *No New York* compilation.¹¹² A metronomic drum and bass accompany Lunch's scything guitar, each syllable of the 'I Woke Up Dreaming' refrain accentuated by a drum hit. Lunch's voice wavers between three or four notes, the yelping drawl of her delivery clashing with the clipped rhythm of bass and drums and the treble distortion of her guitar.

Teenage Jesus and the Jerks therefore subverted the conventional expectations of a rock group by extending punk's obstinacy to an exaggerated degree of noise and atonality that would have been extremely unsustainable had appeal to a mass audience been a concern. This intensity reached its apotheosis in their live performances, where the band would perform short, brutally loud and confrontational sets to the crowd whilst remaining still and uncommunicative, as their grinding and discordant sound drowned out Lunch's lyrics. As Lunch's

¹¹⁰ Traber, p. 169.

¹¹¹ Lunch, cited in Reynolds, *Totally Wired*, p. 147.

¹¹² Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, 'I Woke Up Dreaming', *No New York* (Lillith Records, 2005) (Reissue). *No New York* is a No Wave compilation from 1978 produced by Brian Eno. The compilation was released via Antilles, a now defunct division of Island Records. Lillith Records (a small independent label based in Russia) reissued *No New York* in 2005.

occasional collaborator Nick Zedd recalled, the band ‘would do ten minute sets whilst the audience screamed “less!”’.¹¹³ This lack of engagement with the audience in live performance was an absolute aesthetic choice, as demonstrated by Lunch’s firing of James Chance from an early line-up for dancing, meeting the eyes of the crowd and generally bridging the divide between the band and audience.¹¹⁴

Lunch imposed a rigid and impenetrable barrier between performers and audience, one entirely at odds with the expectations of a band performing to a nightclub full of friends and acquaintances. In the video footage available of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ performance at the Paradise Garage venue in the late 1970s, Lunch and the band stand blank and still during each number, staring the audience down. Audience members can be seen leaving in the early part of the performance, and the band are booed at the conclusion of their set. This prompts a confrontational response from the teenage Lunch, who leans forward over the microphone and sneers: ‘we are great, aren’t we?’, demonstrating a pose of complete disregard for the experience of the audience in favour of her own artistic strategy.¹¹⁵ Lunch still maintains this performance pose with her bands today, staring the audience down and confrontationally engaging with them. During her performance with Retrovirus at London’s Café Oto in 2016, Lunch dismissed requests for particular songs with a curt

¹¹³ Nick Zedd, ‘Bleed’ [Manuscript with Biography], 1990, Series 1: Writing, Box 1, Folder 29, The Nick Zedd Papers MSS 311, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

¹¹⁴ See Lunch, cited in Moore and Coley, p. 26

¹¹⁵ ‘Hell In Paradise: Teenage Jesus and the Jerks at Paradise Garage’, undated, Series 1: Performances, Box 8, 305.0134, NIGHTCLUBBING Archive, ca. 1975-80, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York. My own transcription.

‘Shut the fuck up!’, asserting that her ‘attitude right now, maybe always’, is one of doing ‘what I want and not giving a fuck about what you [the audience] think’.¹¹⁶

This baiting of the audience, a subversion of the expectation to commit to a conventional audience-performer relationship, is familiar also from Kembra Pfahler’s delayed stage time in London referenced in the opening of this thesis, and later raised again in my discussion of Vaginal Davis’s *Memory Island* in Chapter Three. This recurring performance of disdain and refusal to pursue universal acclaim is echoed in Mark Sinker’s suggestion that ‘the purest expression of punk community may be the refusal to reach out [...] to set out obligations of duty towards its nurturing’.¹¹⁷ The similar interactions with the audience in 2017 and the late 1970s suggest that Lunch’s subculturally derived commitment to a performance of audience dismissal is one that she has maintained throughout her career, reinforcing my argument that the post-punk scene of the Lower East Side is the key context for the development of her practice.

As Howard Becker notes in *Art Worlds*, ‘[art] works always bear the marks of the system which distributes them’, and the lack of economic necessity for success and the absence of conventional mechanisms of career progression within existing artistic structures meant that the work that was being produced on the Lower East Side was free from constraints of comprehensibility, an expectation of

¹¹⁶ Lydia Lunch in performance with Retrovirus, Café Oto, London, 6 March 2016.

¹¹⁷ Mark Sinker, ‘Concrete: So As to Self-Destruct’, in *Punk Rock? So What*, pp. 120-139 (p. 126).

entertainment, or formal restrictions of medium.¹¹⁸ As Becker notes, artists who are outside of traditional funding and distribution models can

experience this as a liberation rather than a deprivation. If they need not produce for distribution within the constraints of a system, they can ignore its requirements and make work as big or small, short or long, comprehensive or unintelligible, performable or not as they like, for those constraints typically originate in the rigidity of a distribution system, which cannot handle work of the wrong specifications.¹¹⁹

The distribution models of the Lower East Side were formed around nightclubs and disused or repurposed spaces, and therefore almost completely unbound by any notion of medium specificity or formal qualities of presentation. Venues such as CBGBs (a former biker bar on the Bowery and punk mecca), the Mudd Club, Club 57, Danceteria, the Pyramid Club, and others programmed performance, bands, held film screenings and theatrical events, costume parties and art installations, sharing space, personnel and audience. As Dan Cameron writes, this represented a ‘new type of venue’, one in which ‘links were intentionally created between artists, musicians, performers, and playwrights’.¹²⁰ I cite these clubs, Lunch’s main venues for performance, as spaces which explicitly encouraged and facilitated a polymathic practice on the part of the artists that performed in them.

¹¹⁸ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), p. 94.

¹¹⁹ Becker, pp. 96-97.

¹²⁰ Dan Cameron, ‘It Takes A Village’, *East Village USA*, ed. by Dan Cameron, Liza Kerwin and Alan Moore (New York: New Museum, 2004), pp 42-64 (p. 57).

Uzi Parnes writes that these clubs were themselves part of the subcultural network, that although the 'particular esthetic of each space varies, the performers move from club to club, and the owners cooperate in lending equipment, talent, and moral support'.¹²¹ Of Club 57, Parnes writes the venue 'possessed an "anything goes" esthetic', that 'allowed a great diversity' in its booking policies.¹²² The programming of an artist's work at these venues legitimised much of the artistic experimentation, disciplinary ambiguity and general strangeness of work through an effectively guaranteed audience of fellow artists and scene figures at these venues, which would likely be full regardless of what was shown. This is a key point, allowing experimentation without requiring concession to marketing, publicity or the need to put 'bums on seats'. As Ann Magnuson (involved with the programming of Club 57 and Danceteria at this time) describes, artists could do 'something new every night. If something didn't "work" it didn't matter. You'd try something different the next night. The stakes were so low you could take endless risks', a situation which relates back to Bourdieu's notion of a reprieve from necessity on the part of these artists.¹²³

Artists would thus appear as actors in the many films being produced, musicians in ad-hoc bands, performers on the stages of nightclubs, and as writers in the ubiquitous Xeroxed fanzines. With different media sharing space and audiences, disciplinary notions of artistic compartmentalisation ceased to be significant, and

¹²¹ Uzi Parnes, 'Pop Performance in East Village Clubs', *The Drama Review: TDR*, 29 (1985), 5-16 (p. 8).

¹²² Parnes, p. 8.

¹²³ Ann Magnuson, cited by Dominic Johnson, in *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art* (London: Palgrave, 2015), p. 160.

new opportunities for innovation presented themselves. Individual goals of success within a more traditionally constituted artistic role, one with more clearly defined parameters for progression (such as being a poet or painter) were subsumed into a shared desire to produce work that appealed to the other members of the overlapping scenes, particularly in the clubs and at parties.¹²⁴ This kind of environment, in which film, music and performance were occurring simultaneously and in relation to each other encouraged an inherently polymathic approach towards artistic practice on the Lower East Side. As Lunch remembers

people were coming to music from paintings, or visual arts, or films, and collaborating together. I think part of what helped at that time were these loft parties, or the fact that there would be parties or events to go to where people could connect or mingle; there were clubs that people wanted to go to.¹²⁵

These shared spaces for presentation served to constitute the Lower East Side as a distinct subculture, which in turn then results in certain shared aesthetics across different forms of artistic production. It is important to acknowledge this shared context of presentation and reception in analysis devoted to the artistic scene of the Lower East Side. As McCormick writes, 'the point that they were in the same room,

¹²⁴ This atmosphere and motivation is discussed by Lunch in in the 2010 documentary *Blank City*, dir. by Celine Danhier, (Pure Fragment, 2010).

¹²⁵ Lunch, *Interviews with V. Vale*, p. 48.

on the same drugs, sleeping with one another and sharing every other aspect of being young is what we as historians do not do a very good job of translating'.¹²⁶

The translation of this network of like-minded individuals and appreciative contemporaries that endorses and affirms an artist's work to Lunch's current relationship to her audience is useful in relation to the ways her work is written about and examined. It also has an important relevance to Lunch's stated aims as an artist. As Lunch says in conversation with V. Vale:

I'm not doing it for fifty, or one hundred, or two thousand [...] I'm always doing what I do creatively for the few people that are on the guest list, and maybe the two others that have paid (!) that you know have some kind of desperate *hope* that they're going to hear one sentence – one paragraph – that is going to relieve them of something.¹²⁷

In this statement, three aspects of the Lower East Side post-punk scene cohere that make up my specifically subcultural articulation of Lunch's polymathic practice: the importance of its original context of production; the reprieve from a financial imperative to succeed or progress; and the idea of a defined and specific audience. By emphasising the importance of the guest list, usually made up of friends and peers, Lunch exemplifies the subcultural community, the network of like-minded individuals and appreciative contemporaries that endorses and affirms an artist's

¹²⁶ McCormick, p. 99.

¹²⁷ Lunch, *Interviews by V. Vale*, p. 43. Exclamation in text.

work within the frameworks of that scene. For Lunch, the original network that she was a part of was the subculture of the Lower East Side, and her purposeful framing of those capable of engaging as she would wish them to with her work is an expression of subcultural distinction. Lunch claims that ‘most of the work I do articulates the frustrations of a very small but elite community [...] I like the elitism of it’.¹²⁸

Discussing Lunch’s audience therefore requires an awareness of what Roger Sabin refers to as ‘the different levels of engagement’ of subcultural audience, which ranges from the most invested’ for whom the subculture might be a way of life to those who engage ‘occasionally by buying a record or going to a gig’.¹²⁹ On the Lower East Side, the pejorative label of a ‘Bridge and Tunnel’ crowd (those travelling in from New Jersey and other New York boroughs by the bridges and tunnels surrounding Manhattan), for example, was commonly used to distinguish between those for who the scene was a way of life and those denigrated as ‘unhip out-of-towners’.¹³⁰ By the limiting of her audience (or, at least, the claim to wish to limit her audience) to those she identifies with, Lunch implies a shared lifestyle or at least a similar outlook, a subcultural identification with being distinct from the mainstream.

¹²⁸ Lunch, cited in Davis, *Deathtripping*, p. 182.

¹²⁹ Roger Sabin, ‘Introduction’, *Punk Rock: So What?*, pp. 1-13 (p. 6).

¹³⁰ Neal Keating, ‘Journeys in the Naked City: Adventures in New York Before the Rain’, *Datacide*, <<http://datacide-magazine.com/journeys-in-the-naked-city-adventures-in-new-york-before-the-rain/>> [accessed 8 Mar 2017] (para. 8 of 18).

Lunch's insistence on managing her own context of reception is key to understanding her as both a member of a subculture, committed to differentiation of herself and her peers from others, and to how her own attempts to govern her context of reception affects critical analysis of her work. Lunch refuses to accommodate, soften or adapt to broaden her appeal or have access to greater commercial distribution or critical coverage. Her statement 'I did not want to be popular' cited in Masters' *No Wave* reveals a determined marginality, a horror of widespread acceptance and of misplaced identification with her work.¹³¹ Lunch carefully cultivates her niche persona, in terms of subcultural capital, claiming a preference for performances identified as spoken word in advertising 'because it minimises who's going to take their time to go to a show', or, perhaps, write about it in detail.¹³²

This relates to Dave Laing's suggestion that subcultures, like punk in his example and No Wave in mine, 'must organise the context of reception' in order to preserve its meaning and significance.¹³³ Laing suggests that the status of a 'punk listener', or an 'alignment with the musician's strategy of provocation' must include

a pleasure in the awareness of how the other, 'traumatized' listener will be discomfited. That is, the identity of punk as something different depends in

¹³¹ Lunch, cited in Masters, p. 102

¹³² Lunch, *Interviews by V. Vale*, p. 24.

¹³³ Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Oakland: PM Press, 2015), p. 73.

part on its achieving a disquieting impact of listeners whose expectations are framed by mainstream popular music and its values.¹³⁴

This might even be read as a version of ‘self-sabotage’, a purposeful denial of opportunities for progression and a continual undermining of an artist’s own significance and canonicity. This concept of self-sabotage is a key aspect of my discussion of Vaginal Davis’s work in Chapter Three, particularly how this relates to a subculturally grounded anti-institutionalism on the part of the post-punk polymath. Lunch’s management of her own context of reception is both a public pose, and born out in the formal qualities of her practice, through niche citation and subcultural citation.

The Aesthetic of ‘Availabism’ and Bricolage

The combination of DIY spirit, artistic ambition and the collaborative nature of the Lower East Side is described by Kembra Pfahler as ‘availabism’, which she defines as ‘making the best use of what’s available’.¹³⁵ This availabism, like the shared spaces of the nightclubs, served to further constitute the subculture of the Lower East Side by becoming a shared aesthetic vocabulary across music, film, performance and visual art. Repurposed trash, comics, pornography, pulp literature, rickety

¹³⁴ Laing, p. 102.

¹³⁵ Kembra Pfahler, ‘Kembra Pfahler and The Mystery of Claywoman’ [Artist Talk/Performance], at *Antony’s Meltdown*, Southbank Centre, London, 11 August 2012. Pfahler also expands on this concept in ‘Press Release and Artist Statement’, Emalin Gallery, <<http://emalin.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Kembra-Pfahler-Press-Release-and-artist-statement.pdf>> [accessed 4 May 2017].

instruments, stolen goods and other cheap pop culture ephemera became part of the patchwork of influences that surfaced throughout the work of artists in the area, solidifying into a recognisable aesthetic and artistic strategy on the part of post-punk polymaths like Lunch. It is interesting to consider this availabism in relation to the constitution of the Lower East Side as a post-punk subculture, and of Lunch as an artist invested in her audience sharing that identification.

The collaborative combination of skills and resources, the corresponding aesthetic of availabist production and the encoding of social dynamics within the downtown scene can be related usefully to Dick Hebdige's concept of punk *bricolage*, when he writes that punks 'are capable of infinite extension because basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them'.¹³⁶ Although specifically referring to the British iteration of punk, and largely being concerned with the semiotic dimension of this collage, Hebdige's point that the constant circulation of individual elements of cultural signification (clothes, art, writing, artistic influences) allows the establishment of a unique subculture is relevant here as a similar operation is at play. Bricolage, as the combination of disparate elements into a new whole is certainly evocative of the output of the downtown scene, in their processes as well as aesthetic. This process, as outlined by Hebdige, is 'implicitly coherent' to those embedded in the scene, 'though explicitly bewildering' to the rest of society.¹³⁷ By decoding this bricolage in relation to

¹³⁶ Hebdige, p. 103.

¹³⁷ Hebdige, p. 103.

Lunch's authorship, new resonances of her practice as reflecting to the subcultural constitution of the Lower East Side post-punk scene can be gleaned.

I suggest James Nares' film *Rome '78* (1978), in which Lunch appears, as useful example to deploy in relation to this aim. The film was, like many of those made on the Lower East Side during this period, shot extremely cheaply on Super-8, allowing 'filmmakers to share with punk a sense of immediacy and "anyone-can-do-it" ontology' but resulting in generally poor sound quality and a grainy (if stylish) visual fidelity.¹³⁸ The film attempts to stage the story of Roman Emperor Caligula within the availabist aesthetic context of the Lower East Side. Little or no attempt was made to disguise the sounds of the modern city (traffic, people on the street, etc.) or preserve historical continuity as the actors perform, and the plot bears little relation to the actual history of the period (37-41 AD). Locations around New York with vaguely classical architecture (such as the tomb of Ulysses S. Grant in Riverside Park) were used as backdrops, and at one point during the production of the film both cast and crew climbed, at night, up a fire escape and through a window in order to shoot in a large domed room in the American Thread Building that the production could not afford to rent.¹³⁹

Reading *Rome '78* within this process of bricolage suggests that it is framed as a work of the particular post-punk subculture of Lower East Side by the signifiers of its

¹³⁸ Sargeant, *Deathtripping*, p. 14.

¹³⁹ See Nares' interview in *Blank City* and Ed Halter, 'James Nares' Downtown Empire Strikes Back', *Village Voice*, <<http://www.villagevoice.com/film/james-naress-downtown-empire-strikes-back-6388280>> [accessed 15 February 2017].

DIY production, such as being shot on Super-8 and relying on minor criminality and public intervention for its backdrops and sets. Its narrative content also relates to the self-definition of those within the subculture, in the historical parallel between Ancient Rome and late 70s New York, and the roles inhabited by downtown figures like Lunch. The speed with which these films were produced meant that much of the dialogue was improvised and downtown characters often played what were essentially versions of themselves. As Masters suggests, the performances of these 'untrained actors fell somewhere between reality and artifice'.¹⁴⁰

Rome '78 is a clear example of a ramshackle, 'availabist' or DIY artistic production that mythologises the context of its own production, having a particular semiotic resonance for the participants of the scene. Hebdige cites Max Ernst's concept of the bricoleur juxtaposing 'two apparently incompatible realities' on an 'apparently unsuitable scale' in his practice as relating to the practices of subcultures, and Nares certainly transposes two apparently incompatible realities in *Rome '78*.¹⁴¹ The film conflates the period of decline Caligula's rule signalled for the Roman Empire with the municipal problems of New York in the 1970s, suggesting an equivalence between the hedonistic lifestyle of Roman nobles and the temporarily ennobled cast of what Nares refers to as 'downtown personalities'.¹⁴² Rome and the Lower East Side are juxtaposed here in order to, as Hebdige describes, 'disrupt and reorganize meaning', meanings that are then decodable to the other participants on the Lower

¹⁴⁰ Masters, p. 143.

¹⁴¹ Max Ernst, cited in Hebdige, p. 106

¹⁴² Nares, cited in Halter (para. 2 of 10).

East Side.¹⁴³ In terms of recognition or analysis, *Rome '78* is, like Lunch, held up as somewhat characteristic of Lower East Side New Cinema production, but is rarely considered as a piece of work in any detail. In relation to my project in this thesis, an examination of the film's narrative content and Lunch's performance within it is illuminating. Reading Lunch's performance in *Rome '78* in an intertextual relationship to her other work at this time and her general subcultural persona is revealing beyond a focus on it only in relation to other underground cinema or as a totem of the quixotic ambition of the scene. Lunch's other work of the same period, such as her lyrics for Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, provide a useful comparison for her performance in the film in relation to my suggestion that her subcultural persona sustains her practice across mediums.

In casting Lunch in the role of 'Empress', Nares encodes a reference to Lunch's image at the time as a confrontational, sadistic figure who revelled in violence and extremity, 'oblivious to the brutality with which I would lacerate others', as Lunch puts it in her own writing.¹⁴⁴ Lunch performs in the film as a seductive matriarch, wearing black lingerie in contrast to the togas and armour of other characters. This 'Empress' character would have been recognisable as a version of Lunch's subcultural persona to those who shared the subculture of the Lower East Side with her. Its flux between sexuality and comedic descriptions of heinous violence corresponds to this persona, which as Moore and Coley suggest was 'mean and nasty then sweet as pie, doom-charged yet tough and smart and biting funny'.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Hebdige, p. 106.

¹⁴⁴ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁵ Moore and Coley, p. 12.

In one key scene Lunch's character plots political assassinations in graphic detail with the Queen of Sheba (played by No Wave musician Pat Place), whilst suggestively eating grapes from a plastic bowie knife (in another historical incongruity) and reclining on cushions placed on the floor. Lunch's semi-improvised dialogue in this scene, where she suggests that they kill her rivals by 'weight categories, like the pigs they are', is a joyous description of graphic violence, offset by flirtatious laughing and tactile interaction with her co-conspirator.¹⁴⁶

Lunch revels in similar descriptions of bodily dismemberment throughout the film, seen most clearly in the sensuous glee she performs as she recalls a gladiator who 'severed his victim's limbs, tossing them to the lions', whom she later summons to kiss and rub her feet in a scene of sexual domination.¹⁴⁷ Lunch's fascination with bodily dismemberment as 'Empress' is immediately reminiscent of the lyrical dimension of her main musical project at this time, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, and particularly the notorious imagery of 'Orphans', which was released as a single around the time of the *Rome '78* filming.¹⁴⁸ The track features repeated references to mutilated orphans leaving bloody footprints as they run through the snow, the lyrics 'No more ankles, no more clothes' suggesting both horrific mutilation and social neglect.¹⁴⁹ This recurring motif of dismemberment deploys extreme violence as a metaphor for Lunch's perception of a morally bankrupt and spiteful culture.

¹⁴⁶ Lunch, *Rome '78* (dir. by James Nares, 1978). My own transcription.

¹⁴⁷ Lunch, *Rome '78*. My own transcription.

¹⁴⁸ Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, 'Orphans', *Orphans/Less of Me* (Migraine Records, 1978).

¹⁴⁹ Lunch, 'Orphans'. Lyrics taken from liner notes.

In the lyrics of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks and her improvised lines in *Rome '78* Lunch demonstrates a drive towards affront and difficulty that reveals how her residency on the Lower East Side constitutes a subcultural rejection of her parent culture. As Hebdige writes 'the objects chosen' for redeployment within the process of bricolage by London punks were 'homologous with the focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self-image of the subculture', and the same is true here in relation to the post-punk scene of the Lower East Side.¹⁵⁰ Lunch argues that her lyrics for Teenage Jesus and the Jerks are rooted in

rage, hatred, rebellion and the failure of the Summer of Love. That really defined the nihilism of the '70s, especially in New York, which was the bankrupt, crime-laden bowels of the universe.¹⁵¹

A similar nihilism is present in her lines in *Rome '78*, a fascination with violence, powered by ennui, that is performed by both Lunch and the other Roman nobles. 'Empress' dismisses conventional Roman entertainment as boring, suggesting that the last time 'I went to those [gladiatorial] games I swore I'd never go again', lamenting her belief in the 'stupid senators who say they'll be the best ever'.¹⁵² Lunch's character dismisses this sanctioned popular entertainment in favour of a sexual depravity and violent interventions in broader Roman society, leading to the

¹⁵⁰ Hebdige, p. 114.

¹⁵¹ Lydia Lunch, cited in Jordan N. Mamone, 'Lydia Lunch on the resurrection of No Wave Juggernaut Teenage Jesus and the Jerks', *Time Out New York*, <<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/music/lydia-lunch-on-the-resurrection-of-no-wave-juggernaut-teenage-jesus-and-the-jerks>> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para. 4 of 11).

¹⁵² Lunch, *Rome '78*.

climactic assassination that ends the film. It is revealing to compare the character Lunch plays in *Rome '78* and her rejection of her social confinement in favour of violence and transgression with the pose struck by Lunch in the lyrics to Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. 'The Closet', for example, a track featured on *No New York*, illustrates Lunch's feelings of social confinement in the 20th Century through allusions to literal suffocation. Lunch sneers/sings

I'm in a closet and I can't breathe

Won't you please just release me ¹⁵³

It is a song that is a clear repudiation of predictable and stable middle-class America, and an illustration of Lunch's lyrics as those which capture the zeitgeist of living on the Lower East Side, embodying a subcultural commitment to distinction. Her lyrics explicitly demonstrate a rejection of her parent culture:

Suburban wealth and middle class wellbeing

All it did was strip my feelings ¹⁵⁴

In transcription, these lyrics have an immediately apparent relevance to a reading of the subcultural dynamic on the Lower East Side at this time. As an artistic environment, it featured cultural exiles like Lunch who were attempting to escape from the confines of this parent culture, including gender roles, notions of sexual

¹⁵³ Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, 'The Closet', *No New York*. Lyrics taken from liner notes.

¹⁵⁴ 'The Closet', *No New York*.

propriety and financial aspiration. As Lunch writes in *Paradoxia*, even sleeping in the New York subway would have been preferable to staying upstate, which she saw as full of ‘retards whose idea of fun was 3.2 kids, the dog, the cat, the car, the truck and a moderate mortgage’.¹⁵⁵

The extremity of the allusions to violence in the lyrics to both ‘The Closet’ and ‘Orphans’ demonstrate Lunch’s desire to, as Dylan Clark writes, ‘go beyond what capitalism and bourgeois society could swallow’ in its ‘angers, pleasures, and ugliness’.¹⁵⁶ This is a classic subcultural strategy, identified by Hebdige in relation to the first wave of punks, for whom he writes the ‘perverse and abnormal were valued intrinsically’ as a way of distinguishing themselves from their parent culture.¹⁵⁷ *Rome ’78* uses the decadence of Caligulan Rome as a metaphor to suggest an equivalence between the post-punk subculture of the Lower East Side and the period, positioning the drive towards violence and sexuality (literally for the Roman nobles, and in imagery for Lunch and the No Wave) within a context of societal breakdown and rejection of the status quo.

These processes of bricolage facilitated a shared sensibility in the work emerging from the Lower East Side from the late 1970s and into the 1990s (including music, film, performance and visual art), with select confluences in aesthetic, production, topic and dissemination. Artists combined not only aesthetic signifiers and stylistic

¹⁵⁵ Lunch, *Paradoxia*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁶ Dylan Clark, ‘The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture’, in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. by David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p. 225.

¹⁵⁷ Hebdige, p. 107.

conventions in new ways, but used that in order to confirm their own participation within the scene, making work which would have been coherent to their peers but, as Hebdige suggests, 'explicitly bewildering' to others.¹⁵⁸ Whilst it may not be immediately clear to a general audience why Lunch does not wear period costume in *Rome '78*, those familiar with her persona at the time would recognise the citation of Lunch's artistic persona as a sexually voracious provocateur. This reflects Hebdige's argument that subcultures are based on the establishment of a group identity built on exclusivity and differentiation from others by way of encoded symbolism.

As Hebdige puts it, '[t]he communication of a significant *difference*, then (and the parallel communication of a group *identity*) is the 'point' behind the style of all spectacular subcultures'.¹⁵⁹ In this process of reinvention, collaboration and the freely circulating subcultural signifiers of poverty, commitment to originality and reinvention and a rejection of social convention, artists on the Lower East Side operated within the logic of their community and peers. This was a logic of oppositional engagement with the perceived structures of bourgeois American culture rather than one based on a system of disciplinary histories and relations, as in their perception of the uptown art world.

Lunch invokes this sense of personal history and the subjective status of her position as maker in order to maintain or attempt to maintain the integrity of the subcultural

¹⁵⁸ Hebdige, p. 103.

¹⁵⁹ Hebdige, p. 102. Emphasis in original.

grouping she considers herself part of. Like many artists and residents of the Lower East Side, Lunch regularly argues that the conditions of her early maturation as an artist were unique and unrepeatable, stating that the downtown artists were ‘the bastard offspring of *Taxi Driver*, The Vietnam War, Nixon, the Kennedy assassinations and the bankrupting and unbelievable corruption of a city on the verge of collapse’.¹⁶⁰ The specificity of this claim, and of her status as an artist who is a product of this time, before New York was ‘whitewashed of its kaleidoscopic perversion’, locates her activities in a specific time and place.¹⁶¹ The identification by Lunch of a particular and defined minority capable of truly identifying her work reflects the efforts towards subcultural distinction of artists on the Lower East Side and Lunch’s purposeful blurring of her art and life.

Engaging with Lunch’s Art/Life Blur

As I have demonstrated, Lunch’s artistic practice is shaped by her development within the post-punk subculture of the Lower East Side, and usefully understood in relation to its aesthetic strategies, logistical anomalies and to a subcultural policing of her own context of reception. Her maturation there influences the formal qualities of her work, whether the musical onslaught of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks or her performance in *Rome ’78*, the biographical mythologising of *Paradoxia*, or the illustration of domestic unrest in *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home* and ‘Daddy Dearest’. The local, insular and collaborative context of the area provided an

¹⁶⁰ Lydia Lunch, cited in Nutter (para. 12 of 27).

¹⁶¹ Lunch, cited in Johnson, *Post-Punk Then and Now*, p. 27.

environment in which such work could be sustained, and is an example of the way that artists of this post-punk subculture were characterised by practice unburdened by concerns of medium specificity. In relation to this insistence of a particular identification with her practice, I have suggested that a key aspect of Lunch's post-punk polymathy that continues throughout her career is her elision of the boundary between art and life.

The presence and emphasis on Lunch's subjective voice and identity across her work in all media implies that her work is a site of essential personal expression, that it could not have been made by any other artist. Lunch distinguishes this from the more traditional identification between artists and their work when she speaks of being in a 'specific category of creation', a position shared in her example by David Wojnarowicz, Karen Finley and the late Wanda Coleman, based around the fact that 'for most of my creative output, I'm dealing with things that have affected me *personally*'.¹⁶² The autobiographical nature of much of Lunch's work is used by the artist to rail against identification with a particular artistic label. Lunch's claim bears a strong relation to her earlier statement, in an interview from 1995, that 'If you are an extreme artist, you are going to be an extreme personality', with a related extremity of lived experience.¹⁶³

It is also notable that two of the artists cited by Lunch in her example have strong and recognisable ties to the Lower East Side, whilst Coleman was strongly identified

¹⁶² Lunch, *Lydia Lunch: Interviews by V. Vale*, p. 47. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶³ Lydia Lunch, cited by Duane Davis in Sargeant, *Deathtripping*, p. 180.

with a similarly depressed area of Los Angeles (the Watts district).¹⁶⁴ In addition to a shared socio-economic environment, the artists above also share a significant breadth of practice. Wojnarowicz, Finley and Coleman all made or make work across the mediums of performance, text and film. The 'special category of creation' Lunch speaks of might then indeed be that of the post-punk polymath, shared as it is in her example by three artists who make work across media, have a deep and abiding identification with a particular deprived urban area in the late 1970s, and who blur the boundary between art and life throughout their practices.¹⁶⁵

The choice to focus or prioritise Lunch's own framing of her practice and the relationship of her autobiography to the work may be unappealing in the context of Roland Barthes' concept of the 'death of the author', with its warning that to 'give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing'.¹⁶⁶ My insistence on the importance of biographical and subcultural context could be misread as a narrow charge to follow her desires or reaffirm her own readings of her work at the expense of other more independent readings. Barthes warns against 'the explanation of the work' sought 'in the man or woman who produced it', and specifically cites 'interviews, magazines [...] diaries and memoirs' as being operative in this operation of closing down meaning,

¹⁶⁴ Vaginal Davis, my case study in Chapter Three, was also raised in the Watts district.

¹⁶⁵ Wojnarowicz is my case study in Chapter Two. Finley was part of the same downtown scene as both Lunch and Wojnarowicz, arriving in New York in 1983. See Karen Finley, *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), p. 16. Coleman published her first book of poems *Good Dog* in 1979, and collaborated with post-punk performers of the Los Angeles scene. See 'Twin Sisters: African American Poet Wanda Coleman and Punk Icon Exene Cervenka', <<https://history.denverlibrary.org/news/twin-sisters-african-american-poet-wanda-coleman-and-punk-icon-exene-cervenka>> [accessed 24 February 2017].

¹⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 147.

materials that I have drawn on extensively in my work so far.¹⁶⁷ I don't believe that to examine individual pieces of work in dialogue with Lunch's deliberate autobiographical bent, and her staging of her autobiography in interviews, magazines and memoirs is necessarily to close it down, however, as Barthes suggests may be the case. Lunch's performance of her personality is a central part of her practice, and the identification of her audience with that performed authorial voice is an essential factor in its success. It is both unrepresentative of her practice and unsatisfying to not hear her own articulations and personality come through in critical reflection.

Whilst the artist's original intent should not govern or limit analysis of their work, I believe that in the case of Lunch there is critical value in taking her prioritisation of specific identification with her autobiography seriously, as an opportunity for better contextualising and analysing her work. Doing so also begins to address Pearson's suggestion that 'motives and perspectives are the things that get left out' in historical survey and occasional acknowledgement.¹⁶⁸ As Allen suggests, when concerned with 'marginalized and oppressed communities and individuals the "death of the Author" and the celebration of interpretative uncertainty are not [always] as obviously liberatory as they appear'.¹⁶⁹ Thus when dealing with an artist whose style and subject matter are extreme and niche in their appeal, examining them without recourse to their original intentions and personality is potentially problematic. To address this is of course a difficult prospect, with Burke writing that

¹⁶⁷ Barthes, p. 143.

¹⁶⁸ Pearson, p. 41.

¹⁶⁹ Allen, p. 4.

it is hard enough for 'tropes, rhetorics, narrative structures, signs and so on to be become objects of a critical science without theory also having to confront the interplay between work and life'.¹⁷⁰ The difficulty then is doing so in a way that does not limit this interplay to simple causality within that reading, or causes it to become 'trivialised life at the service of high art's presumed greater value', as Kaprow warns against.¹⁷¹

How then might an examination of one of Lunch's artworks be undertaken that fully attempted to explore this art/life blurring? I propose instead to see Lunch's autobiographical positioning, her elision of the boundary between art and life and insistence on the relevance of it as another medium in which she works, her autobiography another text to be read intertextually in relation to her film, writing, music and performance. As Ann Jefferson, in her examination of the intertextual relationship of Nathalie Sarraute's autobiography and fiction writes, 'in repeating the forms and values of the fiction, the autobiography is also being called into service as a means of endorsing their validity through the authority of its implicit basis in lived experience'.¹⁷² In the case of Lunch, her continual attempts to position her work within the context of her autobiography fulfils a similar function, endorsing and supporting the formal innovations of her artistic practice by way of essential

¹⁷⁰ Burke, p. 181.

¹⁷¹ Kaprow, p. 203.

¹⁷² Ann Jefferson, 'Autobiography as Intertext: Barthes, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet', *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 108-129 (p. 117).

personal expression. Perhaps as Bob Bert, drummer for Sonic Youth, suggests of Lunch, she has 'conquered every medium, yet her finest work of art is herself'.¹⁷³

Lunch's blurring of fact and fiction in the various instances of her artworks could be placed in relation to the tradition of Selby, Stahl, and the gritty American confessional writing of Charles Bukowski, William S. Burroughs and others, as like these writers Lunch fictionalises biographical events that are to a certain extent identifiable by a reader with some knowledge of her personal history. There are similarities though between the projects of Lunch and many of the Beat writers, in particular, who often produced photography, film, performances and audio experiments alongside their literary innovations.¹⁷⁴ Where, for example, Burroughs' time in the international enclave of Tangier in the 1950s influenced his concept of 'Interzone', (the liminal city of 1959's *Naked Lunch* and other works), figures, situations and personal dynamics from Lunch's time on the Lower East Side reappear across her practice in all media.¹⁷⁵ Their everyday (although often extraordinary) life fed into and added significance to their work, as Lunch's does. As Gavin Butt remarks, it was not 'just experience per se that was celebrated within Beat culture, but those particular experiences undergone by bodies rejected by

¹⁷³ Bob Bert, *#HowIMetLydiaLunch* (audio recording), <<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1339534802/lydia-lunch-a-feature-documentary-film-by-beth-b/posts/1830283>> [accessed 14 March 2017].

¹⁷⁴ The primary Beat Generation writers are Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, but the loosely affiliated literary movement also included Gregory Corso, Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and several related artists and authors including Hubert Selby Jr. and Diane di Prima.

¹⁷⁵ William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove, 1962). Burroughs novel features warring political factions that occupy a city which slips between time frames and the laws of physics. See also Burroughs' essay 'International Zone', published in William Burroughs, *Interzone*, ed. by James Grauerholz (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 47-63, for reflection on the connection between Tangier and Interzone.

respectable society', the lives of those 'beyond the parameters of mainstream American culture'.¹⁷⁶ Although here Butt is referring to the racial dimension of the Beat's valorisation of lifestyles alternative to the dominant culture of middle-class white America, it could also (and without overriding this dimension) refer to their romanticisation of poverty and the 'liberation' of those living in dilapidated areas, and therefore similar to the Lower East Side's subcultural distinction.

In an illustration of the difficulty of placing Lunch in relation to other artists without wanting to undo her stated strategies and goals though, Lunch consistently denies the influence on her work of Beat writers like Burroughs. Lunch's charge that 'Burroughs' writing sucked', Allen Ginsberg wrote 'one good poem' and 'Kerouac was another crappy writer' contrasts markedly with the more familiar claims of figures like Victor Bockris, who writes that artists on the Lower East Side at this time 'adored the Beats and the Beats in turn were grateful'.¹⁷⁷ Lunch suggests that the Beat writers are significant as an influence to her only in the sense that they 'wrote what they lived as a very thinly fictionalised version of reality'.¹⁷⁸ Reflecting this concept of her performance of autobiography constituting part of her practice, Lunch draws on the idiosyncrasies of her life, the unique and frequently transgressive experiences of the subcultural lifestyle she lives, to provide raw

¹⁷⁶ Gavin Butt, "'America' and its Discontents: Art and Politics 1945-60", in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. by Amelia Jones (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 19-37, p. 31.

¹⁷⁷ Victor Bockris, *Beat Punks* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), p. 9.

¹⁷⁸ Lunch, cited in Johnson, *Post-Punk Then and Now*, p. 41.

material for her work. As Lunch admits, '[e]very character that goes through my life ends up in a story'.¹⁷⁹

To examine Lunch's intentional blurring of art and life, and conclude my exploration of the interaction between her status as participant in the subculture of the Lower East Side and the intertextual nature of her practice I will now turn to the short story 'Johnny Behind the Deuce' in her book, *Will Work for Drugs* (2009). *Will Work for Drugs* is a particularly relevant text when considering the narrative drive and prevalent nature of Lunch's authorial voice as being reflective of her status as a polymath. As a publication, it could well serve as a metaphor for Lunch's practice, being neither squarely fictional nor factual, nor confined to a single literary genre. The book contains both the confessional and autobiographical material of her memoir *Paradoxia*, short pieces of literary fiction and interviews with other artists. Read as a single text, the book is disorienting in its switch between first person prose, reportage and interview, accompanied by profane, almost poetic, outbursts of swearing and violent sexual imagery throughout.

'Johnny Behind the Deuce' is modelled on Lunch's turbulent relationship with Gene Gregorits, a published writer, editor and registered sex offender, who achieved fleeting tabloid notoriety in 2013 for slicing off and eating his own earlobe on video.¹⁸⁰ I am confident identifying Gregorits as Johnny in the story as Lunch

¹⁷⁹ Lunch, cited in *Angry Women*, p. 108.

¹⁸⁰ For discussion of Gregorits' writing career and his auto-cannibalism, see Lisa Carver, 'He's Not Dead Yet? Life with Gene Gregorits', *VICE*, <https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/hes-not-dead-yet-life-with-gene-gregorits> [accessed 21 February 2017]. Gregorits' own writing includes *Dog*

encodes several recognisable citations to his work, not least the title of the story, which is drawn from an unfinished literary collaboration between Lunch and Gregorits in 2001-02, subsequently completed and published by Gregorits under his own name in 2013 (after *Will Work for Drugs*).¹⁸¹ Lunch's story details the course of a night of drunken binging, and the ambiguously aggressive sexual dynamic between Johnny (Gregorits) and Lunch. Despite the cocaine-fuelled paranoia of Johnny, who physically attacks Lunch in the story for imagined infidelities, she states that she 'couldn't face the fucking fact that one day she may have to live without him'.¹⁸² At the time of his relationship with Lunch, Gregorits was a prolific self-harmer, as is Johnny in this section of *Will Work for Drugs*, who uses a knife to cut his chest and arms.

The story is an illuminating example for considering the way that an understanding of Lunch's autobiography can be read in an analytical context to foster intertextual understanding, or how differing levels of subcultural identification (exemplified by Lunch's insistence that her work is made for her peers) might lead to different readings or experiences. By examining the story in relationship to her other art works, including her self-mythologised biography, new resonances can emerge beyond those achieved by a more disciplinarily constrained attempt to position it solely as a piece of fiction, or only in relation to other writing. As Allen suggests, meaning 'becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to

Days: Volumes 1 & 2 (2013), his sporadically published magazine of transgressive fiction and photography *Sex and Guts* (1997-2004), and the novel *Fishhook* (2013).

¹⁸¹ Gene Gregorits, *Johnny Behind the Deuce* (Saint Peter: Monastrell, 2013). Reference to the unfinished collaboration is included in the publication's blurb.

¹⁸² Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p. 84.

which it refers and relates, moving from the independent text into a network of textual relations'.¹⁸³ In the case of 'Johnny Behind the Deuce', this network of textual relation includes other artworks by Lunch (across multiple mediums), the work of other artists within Lunch's subcultural pantheon (Gregorits himself, and performance artist Ron Athey), and Lunch's centralising of her own biography.

Lunch maintains a personal connection and friendship to Athey, whom Lunch would later introduce Gregorits to.¹⁸⁴ Lunch promotes and highlights Athey's work in her own, interviewing the artist in the interview section of *Will Work for Drugs*, and referencing his performance *JOYCE* (2002) at length.¹⁸⁵ The two share membership in what Lunch describes as an 'elite coven who strive to decode the mystery of self-sacrifice', an apt example of the peers she suggests are her desired audience.¹⁸⁶

After their introduction Athey later documented Gregorits self-harming with a bread-knife, in the same manner as Johnny is described doing in the story, for the 'Ronnie Lee' section of *JOYCE*.¹⁸⁷ The culmination of the footage used in Athey's *JOYCE* is the incision of a deep cut in Gregorits's arm, an act that appears to be an

¹⁸³ Allen, p. 1.

¹⁸⁴ Lunch interviews Athey in *Will Work for Drugs* (pp. 141-149), and contributes to the survey publication of Athey's work *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. by Dominic Johnson (London: Intellect Live, 2013), pp. 194-197. Athey discussed the introduction Lunch made to Gregorits with me during my time as his research assistant during his tenure as Leverhulme Trust Visiting Artist at Queen Mary, University of London (2010). Athey also referenced his relationship with Gregorits in several public events connected with the residency. See footnote 185.

¹⁸⁵ *JOYCE* premiered at the Kampnagel Theatre Hamburg in February 2002. 'Ronnie Lee' has since been shown as a short film within artist talks by Athey, as at Queen Mary University of London, 29 March 2010.

¹⁸⁶ Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p. 141.

¹⁸⁷ 'Ronnie Lee' was one of the videos shown during *JOYCE* to illustrate moments from Athey's childhood, in this case his self-harming as a teenager.

emotional release for Gregorits, and one that brings his apparently compulsive action of cutting to an end.

In the video muscle tissue is exposed by the serrated blade, and then obscured by blood as it flows out of the wound. Almost the exact same image is described by Lunch in *Will Work for Drugs*, during a sexual encounter rendered by Lunch in stream of fragmented images. Lunch describes Johnny cutting himself as they have sex with the image '[f]lesh tone turns fatty pink then deep scarlet', exactly what can be seen in Athey's video piece.¹⁸⁸ The specificity of this image, and Gregorits' subsequent publication of his own *Johnny Behind the Deuce* leaves me confident that 'Johnny' is intended as a representation of Gregorits, and that the allusion to Athey's work is intentional.

The obsessive nature of the relationship between Lunch and Johnny/Gregorits is particularly relevant to *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home*, the installation described in the opening of this chapter. It includes images of a scarred male body extremely similar in appearance to Gregorits as he appears in the 'Ronnie Lee' video, taped to the wall alongside stream of consciousness declarations of obsessive love, writing similar in tone and imagery to the sex scene in 'Johnny Behind the Deuce'. The text within the installation (including repetition of 'I Loved You So Fucking Much') echoes Lunch's repeated statements of love in the story, such as 'I want to save him from himself, want to take care of him, mother him, love him, get him to

¹⁸⁸ Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p. 88.

love himself'.¹⁸⁹ In the story Lunch also refers to the '147 self-inflicted scars' on the chest and arms of Johnny that are the result of his self-harm. Although the head of the figure is not shown in the images included in the installation, the tissue of scars that criss-cross his chest and arms are so extreme as to leave little doubt that Gregorits is both Johnny and the subject of the photographs.¹⁹⁰ Even the title of the installation *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home* is recalled by Lunch's repeated phrase, 'he's not safe. He's not safe. He's not safe from me. And I'm not safe from him'.¹⁹¹ The presentation of the story as an interior monologue deepens the text's emotional significance by way of implied truth, and is a prime example of the manner in which the intertextuality of Lunch's practice is highlighted for a reader aware of the resonances of the Gregorits/Johnny relationship.

Lunch, however, writes in post-script that the story had originally been 'conceived as a film treatment' for the horror film producer Gregg Hale.¹⁹² On reaching the end of the story and reading this note from Lunch, her hard-boiled prose is retrospectively positioned as a proposal for a narrative film. Whilst Lunch's 'Johnny Behind the Deuce' was intended to be written as a film treatment, its publication as a text leaves it unlikely to be compared to her other film projects, such as *Fingered*, despite the narrative similarities, aesthetic confluences and resonances with her subcultural existence on the Lower East Side. In the interview included in Sargeant's *Deathtripping*, Lunch suggests that her films are 'not fictionalized at all'.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p. 85.

¹⁹⁰ Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p. 86.

¹⁹¹ Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p. 85.

¹⁹² Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p.99

¹⁹³ Lunch, cited in Davis, *Deathtripping*, p. 178.

Atmospheric references like the traffic cops whom she writes have turned into ‘Bad Lieutenants’, in reference to Abel Ferrara’s *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), are recast as implicit citations similar to that of Selby in *You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home*.¹⁹⁴

In adapting what might be presumed is a real experience into a proposal for a Hollywood producer, Lunch has engineered what Kaprow refers to as a ‘feedback loop: from the artist to us [...] and around again to the artist’.¹⁹⁵ At what points do Lunch’s life and work diverge? In this blurring of the distinction between her art and life Lunch’s personality and history become indistinguishable from her artwork. Lunch might be either exactly as she portrays herself in her writing, music and performance, or an artist who inhabits the role of their public persona so fully as to make little difference. Knowledge or identification of the recurring figure of Gregorits offers readings of Lunch’s work that are unavailable to those attempting to examine her artistic material outside of its specific subcultural context and constellation of intertextual references. For Lunch this is entirely desirable, stating ‘Preaching to the choir? Yes, [that’s] exactly what I like to do’.¹⁹⁶

My argument in this chapter has revolved around the importance of situating Lunch’s practice within the dynamics of the Lower East Side as a subcultural context. Through an explanation of the municipal situation, and an analysis of the way that

¹⁹⁴ Lunch, *Will Work for Drugs*, p. 92.

¹⁹⁵ Kaprow, p. 204.

¹⁹⁶ Lydia Lunch, cited in Alison Nastasi, ‘Pleasure is the Ultimate Rebellion: Lydia Lunch on Making Poetry Out of Horror, Uncompromising Self-Love, and Her First Major Retrospective’, *Flavorwire*, <<http://flavorwire.com/517600/how-to-be-a-confrontationist-lydia-lunch-on-her-first-major-retrospective-why-pleasure-is-the-ultimate-rebellion-and-making-poetry-out-of-horror>> [accessed 22 Feb 2017] (para. 16 of 33).

affected artistic production and formal innovation, I established the importance of reading the practices of post-punk polymaths like Lunch through the specific context they operate (or operated) in. In my survey of Lunch's critical profile, I suggest that more journalistic or documentary surveys of the Lower East Side tend to emphasise her production across forms, but as documentary practices do not translate into close analysis of the actual content of the artistic work she produces. By contrast, the rare instances of close, scholarly analysis tend to be hesitant to enact intertextual analysis across artistic forms, by way of disciplinary limitation. As I do here in my exploration of the intertextual resonances of 'Johnny Behind the Deuce' I would suggest that an intertextual reading may provide a way to negotiate the boundary between art and life that she attempts to elide.

Rather than undoing or replacing the valuable work that has already been done to document her practice, this understanding allows a process of close focus on individual works with an awareness that they are intended to be seen in closer proximity to each other than work not from the same scene or context. This positions Lunch clearly as a post-punk polymath, her transgression across borders shaped and encouraged by the subcultural context she matured as an artist within. Her practice also suggests the post-punk dismissal of historical recognition, and a scepticism towards critical acknowledgement. Indeed, Lunch revels in her critical marginality, stating that she 'knew I was shitting in the face of history from day one'.¹⁹⁷ Whilst Lunch may therefore deliberately subvert her inclusion in critical and

¹⁹⁷ Lunch, cited in Nastasi, para. 29 of 33.

institutional histories, in Chapter Two, I move on to consider how externally imposed factors might limit or dictate the particular quality and nature of an artist's critical and historical profile.

Chapter Two – David Wojnarowicz: Post-Punk and Political

In 2012, an edition of *VICE* magazine's long running street-photography style fashion caption series 'Dos and Don'ts' featured an image of a young man standing in an art gallery and bearing a strong likeness to the American artist David Wojnarowicz, my case study for this chapter. Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1992, was an inherently political artist, whose practice encompassed film, music, writing, performance and visual art, often documenting his harsh upbringing and sense of alienation from the society around him. This was most acutely rendered in his response to the injustices of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which, as a gay man, Wojnarowicz was directly confronted with through the deaths of friends, lovers, and fellow residents on the Lower East Side, and his own diagnosis as HIV positive in 1988. The figure in the *VICE* image wears large glasses like those worn by the artist, and is similarly thin and tall. The image was accompanied by a caption which read 'There's not much more of a DO than looking like a freshly reincarnated David Wojnarowicz (but this time around without the AIDS)'.¹

VICE is a magazine and media group with an irreverent editorial remit sometimes known colloquially as the 'hipster's bible', described by Ben Quinn as a 'multi-platform purveyor of music, fashion and quixotic journalism'.² As a youth media

¹ This image and caption appeared on the *VICE* website in its long running series of 'Dos and Don'ts' in 2012 and was subsequently published in the *VICE Dos and Don'ts Calendar 2013* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2012).

² Ben Quinn, 'Rupert Murdoch firm dips into hipster's bible with \$70m stake in *VICE*', *Guardian*, 17 August 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/aug/17/rupert-murdoch-vice-magazine-stake>> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para. 1 of 9).

organisation, *VICE* is often positioned as ‘an arbiter of cool’, profiling artists, bands, actors and fashion trends, and whilst it is also now branching out into political reporting and investigative journalism, it does so within an outlook and aesthetic that is heavily indebted to zines, punk and post-punk subcultures and street fashion.³ Although broadly adopting an aspiringly subcultural and superficially progressive stance, *VICE* has received significant criticism for the media group’s vocabulary choices when discussing ethnic minorities and LGBTQ communities, and the perceived hypocrisy of the sale of shares to 20th Century Fox, a company owned by media magnate Rupert Murdoch.⁴

VICE romanticises the Lower East Side scene generally, and has throughout its existence featured several articles on Lydia Lunch, James Chance and other No Wave musicians, as well as Nick Zedd, Tommy Turner and various other figures from the Cinema of Transgression.⁵ The photography of Lunch’s collaborator Richard Kern (which shares a definite aesthetic with his film work, particularly *Submit to Me* from 1986 and *The Evil Cameraman* from 1990) has been a key feature of the magazine from its earliest issues to the present day.⁶ *VICE*’s regular references to the work of

³ Michael Sebastian, ‘2014 Magazine A-List’, *Advertising Age*, 86 (2015), p. 23.

⁴ Quinn (para. 1 of 9).

⁵ *VICE* was founded in 1994 by Suroosh Alvi, Gavin McInnes and Shane Smith with the intention it be ‘punk rock and unlike anything that came before it’. See ‘VICE: The Whole Story’ in *The VICE Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*, ed. by Andy Capper and Piers Martin (London: Revolver, 2006), pp. 13-26 (p. 26).

⁶ Kern is a long-time contributor to the magazine and media group, as both photographer and writer. The web series *Shot By Kern* on VBS.tv (the *VICE* video channel) has been an ongoing concern since 2007, and features Kern photographing nude models in various locations around the world. Stills from the series are published monthly in *VICE*.

the area points to their perception of the post-punk scene of the Lower East Side as a site of significant subcultural capital.

I refer to the *VICE* image and its distasteful caption as an example of the way in which my project within this chapter might be misread in relation to an artist like Wojnarowicz. The caption dismisses and minimises the continuing significance of the AIDS crisis and its impact on those affected by it, as well as its importance to understanding Wojnarowicz's work, in pursuit of a superficial recognition of subcultural capital. Whilst within this chapter I will seek to confirm Wojnarowicz within a post-punk context, and at points question the utility of reading all of his work through a retroactive awareness of his significance in relation to the AIDS crisis, I differentiate it from the kind of subcultural appropriation that is illustrated by the *VICE* caption.

Far from being unrelated or apolitical, I suggest that the particularly post-punk characteristics of his work were significant in both the development of his broader political critique, and the framing of his later response to the AIDS crisis. I will also demonstrate how it is useful and possible to sustain Wojnarowicz's status as an essential figure in the artistic response to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s whilst also recognising the points at which the centrality of the censorship battles it provoked to much of the writing devoted to him has had the effect of dominating or overdetermining discussions of the diversity of his work.

Wojnarowicz's work that dealt directly with the AIDS crisis was concerned with foregrounding of the realities of the disease, its personal effects, and the shortfalls of the political response. In the *VICE* caption, that is dismissed as an unnecessary component of an assumed posture of marginality, which is certainly not what I intend to suggest. Wojnarowicz's subcultural capital has proved alluring to *VICE*, in that the artist symbolises a fashionable, transgressive and oppositional stance towards society, and an independence and artistic integrity, but seeks to minimise the importance of the AIDS crisis in relation to that subcultural connection. Tom Horan's criticism that *VICE* 'wants to have its cake and eat it too, mocking fashion while being obsessed with being fashionable' is useful to consider in relation to this, also providing a neat definition of the implication of *VICE*'s 'hipster's bible' nickname.⁷

The phrase 'hipster' derived from its early twentieth century use to signify subcultural capital amongst musicians and other artists ('hip' being a term for such capital), and was most famously enshrined by Norman Mailer in his 1957 essay 'The White Negro'. Here Mailer discusses the white bohemian appropriation of Black culture in the 1930s and 40s (particularly jazz, marijuana and slang), writing that

In such places as Greenwich Village, a ménage-à-trois was completed – the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life. If marijuana was the wedding

⁷ Tom Horan, 'From Chic to Cheek', *Telegraph*, Culture, 15 July 2006, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/3653808/From-chic-to-cheek.html>> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para. 8 of 10).

ring, the child was the language of Hip for its argot gave expression to abstract states of feeling which all could share, at least all who were Hip. [...]
 So there were a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts'.⁸

Influenced by Mailer's essay and its narrative of cultural appropriation, the term 'hipster' has now come to connote an *appropriation* of subcultural capital.

The 'hipster' aesthetic of *VICE* thus pursues a superficial engagement with subculture, a limited understanding of its wider contexts and a diminished or entirely subverted version of its politics. *VICE*, with its 'irreverent' caption has both latched onto the subcultural capital embedded within Wojnarowicz's work and undermined its moral and conceptual basis, that of a resistance to political apathy, consumerism and oppression. It is not advocating becoming more like Wojnarowicz, with his visceral emotional engagement with loss, grief and emotional pain, nor his strident political beliefs and fortitude in standing up to the forces of repression and censorship, qualities of his practice that I document in detail below. The caption instead advocates the assumption and promotion of a superficial facsimile of Wojnarowicz's persona and stature, cynically tapping in to his subcultural potency (dress, demeanour, symbolic resonance), only 'this time around without the AIDS'.

⁸ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd, 1961), p. 285.

In the *VICE* caption, the minimisation of Wojnarowicz occurs through a reduction of the artist from a rounded, cogent and three-dimensional figure to a stylistic caricature: a thin, vaguely punkish man in a gallery space wearing distinctive spectacles. The implicit meaning of the caption is that Wojnarowicz is an 'AIDS artist' who also has cool fashion sense, that Wojnarowicz is defined by the AIDS crisis, but that he has a desirable aesthetic when divorced from what is implied is his only relevant context. He is too politically connected to AIDS, the caption seems to suggest, to be a useful model for fashionable subcultural borrowing of the kind undertaken by *VICE* in relation to other Lower East Side figures without a qualification of your unwillingness to accept the perceived negative connotations of AIDS and activism. This is of course a deeply problematic position to take. But by suggesting an emulation of Wojnarowicz 'without the AIDS' as a fashionable position, the 'Do's and Don'ts' nevertheless still frame his public profile and artistic practice as things which are properly understood through the AIDS crisis, and that his desirable subcultural capital is too bound up in narratives around AIDS to allow direct appropriation or relation to the other subcultures *VICE* valorises, such as the Lower East Side.

Unlike the *VICE* caption, my move to think about Wojnarowicz within a post-punk context should always be understood as '*as well as*' and not '*instead of*' his resonance as figure of artistic response to the AIDS crisis. As a scholar particularly interested in the parts of an artist's practice dismissed, minimised or generally overlooked, my project is to reaffirm the multiplicity of contexts Wojnarowicz operated in, taking his earlier, post-punk practices as seriously as his later attacks on

those that emerged in relation to the injustices of the AIDS crisis. As Lucy Lippard writes (in an article devoted in part to Wojnarowicz's censorship battles) 'I want to know all I can about the relationship of the parts to the whole, of the artist to his/her life, of the object to the context in which it is made and to the audience for whom it is intended'.⁹ Throughout this chapter I will resituate Wojnarowicz within a post-punk context not to deny or de-politicise his practice in the pursuit of identifying a superficial subcultural capital, but to provide alternative and complementary approaches to a vital and affective practice. Rather than supplanting or overwriting his queerness, his righteous anger at the social marginalisation of homosexuality or his significance to artistic discourse around these issues, my turn towards post-punk as a generative and potent angle from which to examine his practice is intended to both complement the extensive work that has already been done and provide insight into an often-unelaborated context for his work. The reassertion of post-punk as a context for Wojnarowicz alongside his identity as an AIDS activist is not a displacement of the centrality of that narrative. As Sylvère Lotringer writes in one of the only critical essays to explore Wojnarowicz's participation in the Cinema of Transgression, he 'was political in everything he did, without having to call it that way'.¹⁰

⁹ Lucy Lippard, 'Too Political? Forget It', *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. by Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems and Phillip Yenawine (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 39-61 (p. 39).

¹⁰ Sylvère Lotringer, 'Rushes from Death: On David Wojnarowicz', in *You Killed Me First: The Cinema of Transgression*, ed. by Susanne Pfeffer (Berlin: KW Institute/Koenig Books, 2012), pp. 155-161 (p.160).

Structurally, in this chapter I will first outline how Wojnarowicz's artistic practice corresponds to the figure of the post-punk polymath, surveying the various mediums in which he made work and referring to key pieces and moments of critical attention. I highlight this connection in particular through his band 3 Teens Kill 4, and the photography series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978-79). I then examine his critical and public profile as an artist more broadly, before shifting to an analysis of the film *A Fire in My Belly* (1986-87) and the censorship scandal around its removal from display by the Smithsonian Institution in 2010. I examine other potential readings of the film, including its relation to Wojnarowicz's broader political position and framing of Mexico, and to the post-punk film movement the Cinema of Transgression. This structure, an examination of the nature of Wojnarowicz's practice before moving on to the ways in which it has been selectively characterised is partly inspired by Richard Meyer's suggestion in his book *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Art* (which discusses Wojnarowicz's censorship battles), when he highlights the need to 'look closely at Wojnarowicz's art before turning to the ways in which that art was restaged'.¹¹

Wojnarowicz and Post-Punk

¹¹ Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Art* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 247.

Wojnarowicz was raised between New York (state and city) and New Jersey, and was permanently resident on the Lower East Side from 1980, having been a figure in the burgeoning art, poetry, graffiti and No Wave scenes from at least 1979.¹² His artistic practice covered a huge breadth of techniques, mediums and forms, including performance, film, music, painting, sculpture, writing and photography. These were not separate or self-contained projects, but part of a cohesive and expansive practice of shared artistic strategy. As Wojnarowicz writes in his caustic *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*,

I have never called myself a “photographer.” If anybody ever asked me whether I was a photographer, I would say in return “I sometimes make photographs.” I have never been comfortable calling myself anything that would label my acts of creativity because I don’t ever want to take myself so seriously that others would then pull out their magnifying glasses and hold me or my actions up to the ART WORLD criteria of any given medium.¹³

As a statement of artistic intent, Wojnarowicz’s charge that he is uncomfortable fixing any of his creative acts through identification with a particular artistic role (here photographer, but also painter, writer, performer, musician and those related to the other forms in which he made work) is evocative of my attempts within this

¹² I draw on my own archival research in the David Wojnarowicz Papers, held as part of the Downtown Collection in the Fales Archive at New York University, and the recent expansive biography of Wojnarowicz by Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012) for the factual biographical information throughout this chapter, with other sources individually noted.

¹³ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 138-139. Emphasis in original.

chapter to position him as a post-punk polymath, undefined or constrained by any one medium and making in response to a particular context and artistic strategy in opposition to conventional models of production. The essay this quote is drawn from, 'Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch-Tall Politician', is derived from talks given by the artist at Illinois State University and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia in 1990. Being originally articulated in an institutional setting, his comments above also perhaps reveal an anxiety about his relationship to critical reflection and the institutional accommodation of artistic practice, to analyses that seek to position his work in relation to what he describes as 'ART WORLD' criteria, a point I return to below.

Wojnarowicz's art, from his earliest works, maintained a fascination with societal systems of control and repression, cultural and moral boundaries (particularly those around sex and representations of homosexuality), and the mythologising iconography of American life. It's three main strands – visual art, writing and performance – developed alongside each other throughout each stage of his career, with images from his painting narrated in his writings, previously published text used within photographic collages, and elements of live or recorded performance incorporated into his installations. This recirculation of text and imagery is a key to understanding Wojnarowicz as an artist whose practice was polymathic in nature, with motifs recurring across mediums and forms in what Dan Cameron describes as 'a constantly expanding universe of expressive potential'.¹⁴ His late period

¹⁴ Dan Cameron, 'Passion in the Wilderness', *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*, ed. by Amy Scholder (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), pp. 1-45 (p. 1).

multimedia performance *ITSOFOMO: In the Shadow of Forward Motion* (1989), a live collaboration with Ben Neill subsequently also exhibited as a film piece, is a good example of the interrelation of each aspect of Wojnarowicz's practice, bringing together his writing, delivered in performance as a monologue, and a projection of his film work, including images that recur from his painting and installations, such as a spinning globe. The performance/film narrates a sense of increasing social acceleration and fragmentation, encompassing material that deals directly with the grief and anger of watching friends and colleagues die from governmental neglect during the AIDS crisis.

Jennifer Doyle suggests that Wojnarowicz's work is 'unavoidably local, embodied, historical and precise', but that the contexts in which his artworks were made are 'little understood'.¹⁵ As I have already suggested, one of these contexts is the post-punk scene of the Lower East Side, which exerted an influence on Wojnarowicz through his participation in the music and club scenes of the area, as a figure in the 'East Village Art' gallery scene, and as a participant in the Cinema of Transgression. Wojnarowicz endured a harsh upbringing and periods of homelessness before beginning to move in the same Lower East Side context as *Lunch*, with its cheap if precarious housing and close creative community of artists.

Wojnarowicz worked regularly as a waiter or busboy at the same Lower East Side clubs I reference in Chapter One, such as Danceteria and the Peppermint Lounge,

¹⁵ Jennifer Doyle, 'A Thin Line', in *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, ed. by Giancarlo Ambrosino (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), pp. 227-231 (p. 227).

where he would have come into contact with many downtown characters, including Lunch. Although there is little evidence that the two artists were close, they were at least acquainted, as shown by the inclusion of a letter from Lunch to Wojnarowicz in his papers held in the Fales Library at New York University. In the letter, dated 1986, Lunch invites Wojnarowicz to participate in an event/publication she calls 'Readings from the Intimate Diaries of the Sexually Insane', a project which I can find no further reference to and was probably abandoned.¹⁶ The letter nevertheless demonstrates that Lunch saw in Wojnarowicz another kindred spirit, a compatriot and fellow 'extreme artist' that she identified as a peer, just as the proposed title of the event reflects their shared staging of transgressive sexual dynamics and experiences. This can be seen within what is perhaps the best-known example of Wojnarowicz's writing, *Close to the Knives*, a book that contains graphic and emotionally raw descriptions of Wojnarowicz's extraordinarily difficult and abusive upbringing, his time selling sex as an adolescent whilst homeless in New York City, and reflections on the lives, hardships and deaths of friends and fellow residents in the city and on the Lower East Side. It is (in a similar format to Lydia Lunch's later *Will Work for Drugs*) formed of a mix of direct authorial address, essays, and extended sections of semi-fictionalised autobiography, often expanding on or resituating writing previously published in magazines, used in performance, or texts which Wojnarowicz incorporated into his visual artworks.

¹⁶ Lydia Lunch, letter to David Wojnarowicz, 1987, Series II: Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 13, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

One of the least examined artistic projects within Wojnarowicz's practice is that of his band, 3 Teens Kill 4, which also provides one of the most direct and immediately recognisable links between his practice and the post-punk scene of the Lower East Side. In his diaries Wojnarowicz expressed admiration for No Wave bands and musicians, approvingly noting that the 'whole idea of no wave being one in which staleness should never will never [sic] occur, and if it does occur then it's a defeat', in an explicit assertion of identification with the scene.¹⁷ Formed whilst Wojnarowicz was a busboy at Lower East Side club Danceteria in 1980, he remained with the band until 1983, appearing on their independently released 1982 album *No Motive*.¹⁸ Wojnarowicz operated tape recorders for the band as well as singing/chanting with the other members. As Carr writes in her biography of Wojnarowicz, although he sang and occasionally played other instruments, 'his tapes of traffic and street talk and random bits from the radio – that was his unique contribution'.¹⁹

3 Teens Kill 4 developed a sound that combined sparse, programmed drum rhythms with assertive political lyrics (often written by Wojnarowicz and maintaining a similar tone of strident imagery as his later writing) intersected by found sound and interjections from the tape recorders referenced by Carr. Whilst not sharing the same level of aural assault as Lunch's No Wave bands, there are important stylistic resonances with the rest of the scene in their sparse instrumentation of guitar,

¹⁷ David Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz*, ed. by Amy Scholder (New York: Grove, 1999), p.121.

¹⁸ 3 Teens Kill 4, *No Motive* (Point Blank Records, 1982).

¹⁹ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 168.

drum machine and children's toys, and the consistently driving and relentless rhythm of their material. In the documentation of the band's live performance at the Peppermint Lounge in 1980, Wojnarowicz and his bandmates appear nervous but tightly rehearsed, powering through numbers and declaiming their lyrics from the stage. They also demonstrate a similar impulse towards provocation as Lunch does in her taunting of the audience, with Wojnarowicz dedicating a song to 'the men and women in the IRA [Irish Republican Army]', to a spattering of cheers and boos.²⁰ This interjection, delivered with a wry smile from Wojnarowicz, suggests that he, as Lotringer writes in relation to the Cinema of Transgression, 'embraced the same dark impulses that his East Village friends did', deploying an aesthetic of 'crime, horror, death and abjection'.²¹

Alongside his musical projects, Wojnarowicz sprayed stencils and graffiti around the Lower East Side in the late 1970s, a practice which he then developed with the support of several independent and ad-hoc galleries in the area. In the early 1980s his public images of burning houses and falling men began to migrate into these exhibition spaces, developing into a sustained visual art practice that combined them with signature imagery like maps, money, sex and animals into large scale paintings and installations. This collage aesthetic was also maintained in his later paintings, sculpture and photographic montage works. Of his early visual art, it is the photography series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, where Wojnarowicz took

²⁰ '3 Teens Kill 4 at Peppermint Lounge', 1980, Series 1: Performances, Box 7, 305.0123, NIGHTCLUBBING Archive, ca. 1975-80, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York. My own transcription.

²¹ Lotringer, 'Rushes from Death', p. 156.

photographs of friends wearing a mask of the poet Arthur Rimbaud in various locations around New York that is perhaps best-known.²² The Rimbaud figure is shown walking the city, shooting up, masturbating, and riding the subway, communicating a sense of alienation and evoking what Cameron suggests is the 'spirit of an artistic forebear whose fervent embrace of the underground became a direct source of Wojnarowicz's writings'.²³

This series is the subject of an essay by Mysoon Rizk in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and the Body of Desire*, where she discusses how the image of Rimbaud was a subcultural citation, part of a 'legacy and genealogy in which Rimbaud served as a spiritual mentor' to Wojnarowicz.²⁴ Rizk suggests that Rimbaud stands in for Wojnarowicz, the poet's homosexuality, experiences of homelessness and outlaw lifestyle used by the artist to explore his own personal history as well as 'the rock n roll do or die abandon of that period of time'.²⁵ But despite her exploration of the genealogical implication of Wojnarowicz's citation of Rimbaud, Rizk does not mention the post-punk scene specifically in relation to the photographs. Olivia Laing, who discusses the photographs in her autobiographical study of loneliness *The Lonely City*, also makes no reference to the punk and post-

²² Arthur Rimbaud was a French symbolist poet (1854-1891), known for his collection of prose poems *Illuminations* (Paris: Les Publications De La Vogue, 1886). Wojnarowicz's heavily annotated copy is included in his archive: Rimbaud, Arthur, *Illuminations and Other Poems*, 1957, Series XII: Library, Box XII.29, Folder 604, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

²³ Cameron, p. 7.

²⁴ Mysoon Rizk, 'Constructing Histories: David Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*', *The Passionate Camera: Photography and the Body of Desire*, ed. by Deborah Bright (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 178-194 (p. 180).

²⁵ Wojnarowicz, cited in Rizk, 'Constructing Histories', p. 180.

punk resonances of Wojnarowicz's use of the image of Rimbaud.²⁶ Laing situates the images instead in relation to the cruising underground Wojnarowicz participated in and (in relation to her project within the book) to his loneliness in the city at the time.

The depth and rigour of Rizk and Laing's work in this regard confirms the queer significance of Rimbaud's image as one essential to understanding the artworks produced by Wojnarowicz in that environment. As with the rest of my turn towards the post-punk dimension of Wojnarowicz's practice, I present it as a reading to be seen as also significant and illuminating, rather than the post-punk superseding the pier artwork's importance within a context of cruising and sexual identity. The oversight of punk and post-punk as a context for these photographs presents an opportunity for me to resituate them as reflective of post-punk alongside this context of cruising, particularly as the representation of the city as 'Rimbaud visits a fortune teller, rides the subway, hustles in Times Square, eats in a diner' so clearly recalls the representation of urban dilapidation represented in the music, film and other art of the scene at this time, some of which I have already discussed in Chapter One.²⁷ Rimbaud is also a figure with particular resonance to the post-punk Lower East Side, and it is possible to situate the image of Rimbaud directly within a particularly post-punk continuum of subcultural citation. This relates to my suggestion that this context is under-examined in relation to Wojnarowicz's

²⁶ Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (New York: Picador, 2016). Laing discusses the images in the chapter 'In Loving Him', pp. 95-133.

²⁷ Rizk, 'Constructing Histories', p. 183.

practice, and that it exerts an often-unelaborated influence on both the form and content of his work as a whole.

The Rimbaud images are inherently reminiscent of other images of the post-punk scene on the Lower East Side. Although the images are taken all over New York City, from Coney Island to Times Square, they maintain a visual affinity with the aesthetic of the Lower East Side; a grimy, unvarnished presentation of life parallel to the concerns of the rest of the city. One of the Rimbaud images taken in Times Square, in which the masked figure stares directly into the camera as cars and people traverse the pock-marked cityscape behind him, is emblematic of its particular historical moment in the degradation of the buildings behind the figure, the clothes of the bystanders and the Rimbaud figure, and the oppressive, smog choked ambience.

It is also powerfully resonant of a subculture built around framing this sense of isolation from the rest of the world. In each of the images, the city provides a backdrop to the performed character of Rimbaud, an icon of outsider identity motionless against the bustle of the metropolis. Whilst this is of course easily relatable to Wojnarowicz's personal history, as in Rizk's essay, it is also a recurring motif in other images of the post-punk scene. Several images of Lydia Lunch at this time, for example, similarly frame her against a long horizon of dilapidated New York streets, or the dark alleys of downtown. The image of a single figure, staring at the

camera against a degraded and grimy cityscape echoes Lunch's suggestion that it 'felt like this city was the end of the world'.²⁸

Wojnarowicz's citation of Rimbaud himself in the images is also more concretely reminiscent of similar acknowledgements of the poet by other figures of the punk and post-punk scenes. Most notably, Patti Smith writes in her memoir *Just Kids* that she 'embraced [Rimbaud] as compatriot, kin, and even secret love'.²⁹ Both Wojnarowicz's and Smith's adoption of Rimbaud as a totem suggests an attempted correlation of their practices to particular qualities within Rimbaud's. As Carrie Jaurès Noland suggests, the qualities of Rimbaud's poetry taken up by Smith,

the association of primitive expression with violent revolt, the emphasis on racial inferiority and lower class origins (the race of Cain), the perversion of Christian symbolism and the celebration of self-mutilation (wounds, stains) all correspond to features of the punk aesthetic.³⁰

This suggestion is striking when related to Wojnarowicz, as I identify similar qualities recurring throughout his work. The image of a violent revolt of the oppressed, and the staging of the pain and anger of marginalised communities occur throughout his visual art, film, photography and performance (especially, as I document below, in *A Fire in My Belly*).

²⁸ Lydia Lunch, cited in Thurston Moore and Byron Coley, *No Wave. Post-Punk. Underground. New York. 1976-1980*. (New York: Abrams Image, 2008), p. 135.

²⁹ Patti Smith, *Just Kids* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 23.

³⁰ Carrie Jaurès Noland, 'Rimbaud and Patti Smith: Style as Social Deviance', *Critical Inquiry*, 21 (1995), 581-610 (p. 595).

Noland writes that Smith's 'practices of appropriation illustrate how a non-academic reading of a canonical text [Rimbaud's poetry] could help produce a musical style disseminating a countercultural message of social deviance'.³¹ Wojnarowicz's appropriation of the figure of Rimbaud is, I would argue, bound up within that 'musical style', the post-punk movement on the Lower East Side. It provides a critically valuable context for the Rimbaud photographs, suggesting that, not only was the French poet a personal identification for Wojnarowicz because of his queerness and personal history, but perhaps also that his adoption of the figure of Rimbaud was one that correlated to his subcultural identification with the post-punk scene and its originating figures (Smith). Notably, the Rimbaud images are created in 1978/79, before both the AIDS crisis and the East Village Art scene (discussed below), reinforcing my point that the original impetus emerges from a post-punk milieu, the cultural moment Wojnarowicz was moving in at the time.

This adoption of aesthetic influences also taken up by others within the scene directly corresponds to my concept of Wojnarowicz's work contributing to the symbolic formation of the subculture, rather than merely working parallel to it. In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz writes of the various marginalised 'tribes' of society, suggesting that some are 'fatally lulled into society's deep sleep', but that others 'understand what freedom truly is'.³² Those who are aware of their own repression must, in Wojnarowicz's view, band together, to exist in a way that allows

³¹ Noland, p. 582.

³² Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, pp. 37-38.

them to address the 'soundtrack that plays and replays in the heads of members of that tribe', that of a 'civil war and a national trial for the "leaders" of this country, as well as certain individuals in organized religions'.³³ This subcultural identification relates to Wojnarowicz's governing philosophical and political concept, that of the 'pre-invented world'. Wojnarowicz's biographer Cynthia Carr writes that '[b]roadly speaking, this was what he called "the wall of illusion surrounding society and its structures" – false history, false spirituality, government control'.³⁴ Wojnarowicz himself explains the limits of such a world when he explains that

In being born into a pre-invented existence, we're born into a structure that starts with traffic lights and goes all the way up to governmental decrees in Congress. This is what your existence has to fit in.³⁵

This concept has an immediately apparent connection to the notion of the dominant culture outlined in my discussion of subcultural theory, as a system of economic relation that governs the relations of all other cultures within a society, the effects of which within the local parent culture subcultures attempt to address through their stylistic tropes. In *Resistance Through Rituals*, it is suggested that subcultures 'solve, but in an imaginary way, problems which at a concrete material level remain unresolved'.³⁶ As in Rimbaud's poetry, Lunch's lyrics and the dialogue of *Rome '78*,

³³ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 38.

³⁴ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 328.

³⁵ Wojnarowicz, cited in *Tongues of Flame*, p. 52.

³⁶ Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class', in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3-63 (p. 37).

the imaginary resolution of societal problems in Wojnarowicz's work is made through images of mutilation, violence and revolt, with the artist suggesting that without the community of similarly marginalised figures those aware of them 'can end up on a street corner, homeless, hungry and wild-eyed'.³⁷ This sense of fidelity to a community is emphatically asserted in relation to his later activism around the AIDS crisis, but is also essential to his early embeddedness within post-punk.

As his visual art practice developed, Wojnarowicz became a key figure in the 'East Village Art' gallery movement, which grew out of the downtown scene when certain artists and galleries from the Lower East Side briefly became economically viable and fashionably pursued by the wider international art market (from roughly 1981 to 1985). Wojnarowicz, who utilised supermarket posters and dustbin lids as canvases for graffiti inspired stencils and images, was caught up in the gallery rush. Edward Lucie-Smith described the scene as 'a proliferation of new galleries on New York's Lower East Side which suddenly arose to challenge the dominance which SoHo (South of Houston Street) had established in the previous decade'.³⁸ The adoption of a specific element of the downtown scene by the art market was soon, according to Anne Bowler and Blaine McBurney, 'almost as famous for its controversial role in the gentrification of one of America's worst ghettos as for the aesthetic sensation aroused by its trademark neo-expressionist and graffiti inspired painting'.³⁹

³⁷ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 38.

³⁸ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 190.

³⁹ Anne Bowler and Blaine McBurney, 'Gentrification and the Avant-Garde in New York's East Village: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 8 (1991), 49-77 (p. 49).

Wojnarowicz's images of cartoonish and grotesque animal figures, violent bandits and bright stencilled symbols of war and suffering, such as crosshairs, destroyed houses and military bombers, were taken up by this market fashion. Exemplifying his position within this East Village scene, Wojnarowicz appeared in Timothy Greenfield-Sanders' photograph, *The New Irascibles – Artists*, published by *Arts* magazine in 1985.⁴⁰ This photograph is a clear contemporary document of those considered the first and most important artists of East Village Art (along with the counterpart images *Dealers* and *Critics*) and Wojnarowicz is pictured alongside Luis Frangella, Mike Bidlo, Mark Kostabi, Richard Hambleton and others.

John Carlin, in his essay in the catalogue accompanying Wojnarowicz's retrospective exhibition at Illinois State University (the institution where Wojnarowicz declared his ambivalence towards the art world) describes his visual work of this time as 'simple cartoon-like messages about tension and transformation that collapsed primitive and industrial imagery into each other'.⁴¹ His visual art practice maintained the same deeply autobiographical qualities as those present in his writing, with works like *Dad's Boat* (1984) illustrating his difficult upbringing through figurative expressions of personal iconography (the titular ship that returned Wojnarowicz's abusive father, a sailor, to the family). In the painting a burning ship looms towards the

⁴⁰ 'The New Irascibles: Portfolio of Six Portraits by Timothy Greenfield Sanders', *Arts Magazine*, Sept 1985, Vol. 60, No. 1, Series XII: Library, Box. XII.3, Folder 68, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

⁴¹ John Carlin, 'David Wojnarowicz: As the World Turns', *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame*, ed. by Barry Blinderman (New York: D.A.P/University Galleries Illinois State University, 1991), pp. 21-33 (p. 22).

viewer across a stormy sea, its prow pointing towards an inset photograph of a dead dog, the vessel's black hull and the orange flames billowing from its deck a figurative expression of dread and coming destruction. As Steve Doughton remembers, in contrast to other artists, the narratives that built up around Wojnarowicz, and this autobiographical dimension, meant his work was 'easily marketed as the pure expression of this ex-street hustler who got his education [...] on the mean streets of the big city and not at art school'.⁴² The suggestion that Wojnarowicz's success was bound up in a particular characterisation of him at this time foreshadows a similar privileging of his sexual identity and personal history as explanatory and contextual factors for his work in later public discourses.

The East Village Art scene began to decline in profile in the mid-1980s as it became rapidly commoditised. Many in the East Village felt that the injection of money suggested by Bowler and McBurney signalled the end of the subcultural potency of the movement. As the painter David West remembers, by 'the mid-'80s the art scene in New York was *so surface*'.⁴³ The East Village aesthetic of graffiti-inspired, irreverent conceptual work and its postmodern collage of influences and aesthetics had been appropriated by advertising and large commercial galleries, and many of the focal points of the scene had either closed (Civilian Warfare Gallery) or moved across the city to the more traditional art centres of SoHo or Chelsea (Gracie Mansion Gallery). Together this amounted to 'a decline in the area as an art center

⁴² Sylvère Lotringer, 'Steve Doughton [Interview]', *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, pp. 46-53 (p. 53).

⁴³ Sylvère Lotringer 'David West [Interview]', *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, pp. 91-95 (p. 93). Emphasis in original.

[in which] the more successful galleries move to SoHo and many of those left behind falter amidst skyrocketing commercial rents'.⁴⁴ As I suggest below, the marketisation of the scene was influential in the dismissal of its significance, and the undermining of the political potential of the work being produced, particularly by more disciplinarily conservative art historians like Craig Owens and Irving Sandler.

Wojnarowicz moved away from the increasingly marketised remnant of the East Village Art scene in the early 1980s to further develop his practice of murals and installations in the abandoned piers that lined the Hudson River, which were also a cruising ground used by men to meet for anonymous sex. Fiona Anderson's work on these piers as creative sites during this period of New York's history cites them as environments Wojnarowicz explored for 'solitude, creative inspiration and sex'.⁴⁵ This idea of solitude is key for my own analysis, as for Wojnarowicz his artistic interventions in this public space were important because the actions (graffiti, murals, the growing of a meadow of grass inside a disused warehouse) 'were the most anonymous' and thus the most removed from his public profile as an artist.⁴⁶ I point to the extensive scholarly work already done by Anderson, Blinderman and Meyer in relation to the sexual dimension of Wojnarowicz's work on the piers in order to acknowledge the influence and significance cruising contexts had on his development as an artist and activist at this time. These spaces for anonymous sexual encounters were romanticised and stylised by Wojnarowicz in poems,

⁴⁴ Bowler and McBurney, p. 69.

⁴⁵ Fiona Anderson, 'Cruising the Queer Ruins of New York's Abandoned Waterfront', *Performance Research*, 20:3, 135-144 (p. 135).

⁴⁶ Wojnarowicz, cited in Barry Blinderman, 'The Compression of Time: An Interview with David Wojnarowicz', *Tongues of Flame*, pp. 49-63 (p. 56).

paintings, graffiti and photographs, and are an important context for understanding much of the imagery that recurs throughout this practice, particularly the pairing of images of male sexuality with ruined or burning buildings and cities. I reference further the centrality of these images to his censorship battles later in this chapter.

It was not only their status as a cruising space that enticed Wojnarowicz to the piers, however. As Anderson writes for 'Wojnarowicz the waterfront was animated by an eroticism that exceeded its appropriation by cruising men', one that seemed to 'emerge from the physical form of the harbour, emanating from the ruined building themselves'.⁴⁷ Thus the potential of these spaces for Wojnarowicz was animated by both their sexual charge and their isolation, their out of time-ness, a fetishisation of municipal dilapidation also reflective of the characterisation of the Lower East Side by participants in the post-punk scene. Carlo McCormick writes that Wojnarowicz's move away from the gallery scene around East Village Art and towards other projects (like the piers) constituted a rejection of his 'success within the artworld [...] out of his total disgust and contempt for the hypocrisy, insincerity and insensitivity he sensed in his patrons'.⁴⁸ This rejection of success and approbation is reminiscent of Lunch's continual refusal to maintain successful projects, a disavowal of commercial success and acceptance that calls back again to what Marc Masters suggests was one of the characteristics of the post-punk scene, artists who 'had the rare courage to move on once their points were made'.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Anderson, p. 142.

⁴⁸ Carlo McCormick, 'Fables, Facts, Riddles & Reasons in Wojnarowicz's Mythpoetica', *Tongues of Flame*, pp. 11-19 (p 15).

⁴⁹ Marc Masters, *No Wave* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), p. 200.

During the mid-1980s Wojnarowicz also began producing films with the artists that made up the Cinema of Transgression, an anarchic and often juvenily provocative collection of filmmakers that emerged from the post-punk scene and the filmmaking associated with it, which I have already referenced in relation to Lunch and her roles in *Rome '78* and *Fingered*. Lunch's performance in *Fingered* is quintessentially one of the Cinema of Transgression, Nick Zedd's Cinema of Transgression manifesto suggesting that the movement is characterised by 'blood, shame, pain and ecstasy, the likes of which no one has yet imagined', going beyond all limits set by 'taste, morality or any other traditional value system'.⁵⁰ The manifesto is a polemical text where Zedd (writing under the pseudonym 'Orion Jeriko') rejects the contemporary values of art cinema as he sees them. Zedd writes that the avant-garde have become slaves to an 'entrenched academic snobbery', 'a monument to laziness known as "structuralism"' that results in films made 'to bore, tranquilise and obfuscate'.⁵¹ The 'structuralism' Zedd identifies above likely refers to several key figures in the experimental film of the 1970s, such as Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad and Owen Land.

Zedd saw these artists as needlessly impenetrable and elitist, as they frequently produced work questioning the nature of the medium through techniques that addressed the technical process of film making, and sought to expand film's formal possibilities at the expense of narrative or emotional content. The Cinema of

⁵⁰ Nick Zedd, 'The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto', *You Killed Me First: The Cinema of Transgression*, ed. by Susanne Pfeffer (Berlin: KW Institute/Koenig Books, 2012), p. 17.

⁵¹ Zedd, p. 17.

Transgression attempted to restore humour and prankster subversion to experimental filmmaking, suggesting that 'a sense of humour is an essential element discarded by the doddering academics'.⁵² An echo of this attitude can be seen in Wojnarowicz's unease at the criteria of the 'ART WORLD' suggesting that he, like Zedd, viewed it as staid or narrowly confined to an investigation of form at the expense of narrative and/or political resonance. Like No Wave and East Village Art, The Cinema of Transgression was influenced significantly by its subcultural environment, resulting in an aesthetic and philosophy of production that McCormick called 'the purest distillation of the collective pain and passion of the East Village'.⁵³

The explicit and irreverent work made during his association with these filmmakers (such as the collaboration with Turner, *Where Evil Dwells*, and Kern's *You Killed Me First*, both in 1985) often saw Wojnarowicz again draw on his own biographical information, but in an ad-hoc, narrative exploration designed to offend, amuse and disgust rather than provoke empathy or identification. In *You Killed Me First*, for example, Wojnarowicz plays the father of a young family, his wife played by fellow artist Karen Finley, and daughter by No Wave personality Lung Leg. The killing of the family rabbit in the film, which Wojnarowicz presents to his on-screen daughter, was based on a childhood memory of Wojnarowicz's real father killing his pet rabbit and feeding it to the artist and his siblings, as the director Richard Kern remembers.⁵⁴

⁵² Zedd, p. 17.

⁵³ Carlo McCormick, 'Cinema of Transgression: Reprisal in Rewind', in *You Killed Me First*, pp. 38-41 (pp. 38-39).

⁵⁴ Richard Kern, cited in 'Richard Kern', *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, pp. 62-73 (p. 67).

As well as being a collaboration that drew on Wojnarowicz's biography, *You Killed Me First* also allows me to highlight its relation to a polymathic mode of production on Wojnarowicz's part, and the use of aesthetic signatures that might have derived from the Cinema of Transgression in his later visual art. The film, made with Kern, was originally screened on a small TV screen within an installation by Wojnarowicz at the Lower East Side gallery Ground Zero. Three skeletons were placed within the gallery, as Carr remembers, 'wearing the character's outfits from the movie' with 'pigs blood (from a local butcher) splattered everywhere', a tableaux which staged the aftermath of the final scene of the film, in which the family are killed by their wayward daughter.⁵⁵ In this instance then the film collaboration with Kern was used by Wojnarowicz to generate an installation for a gallery context, bringing in the grimy, challenging and confrontational aesthetic of the film movement into other aspects of his work as well. Skeletons and blood remained visual signatures in Wojnarowicz's work long after he ceased to make work with Kern and Turner, including in his work which later responded to the AIDS crisis.⁵⁶

The influence of the work made as part of the Cinema of Transgression (like *You Killed Me First*) on his visual art at the same time therefore reinforces my argument of the interrelated, inherently polymathic nature of his practice, and the influence of its particularly post-punk aesthetic beyond his immediate association with the Cinema of Transgression. The post-punk scene of the Lower East Side provides an important context for the development of Wojnarowicz's practice as, like Lunch, he

⁵⁵ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 318.

⁵⁶ I describe a similar installation featuring skeletons, *America: Heads of Family/Heads of State* (1989-90) below.

made work that denied limitations of medium, presented within independent venues and denied the relevance of his acknowledgement within art world structures – including notions of market success, publicity and institutional canonisation. I return to the particular aesthetic of the Cinema of Transgression towards the end of this chapter during my discussion of *A Fire in My Belly*, and its influence on Wojnarowicz's practice. Below, I proceed to suggest another instance of the influence of the post-punk scene on his work.

Later Work, Activism and A Post-Punk Precursor

Wojnarowicz's work found a new urgency in responding to the AIDS crisis that was beginning to unavoidably change the landscape of New York's downtown communities, particularly after his mentor and former lover Peter Hujar's death in November 1987. His homosexuality ensured an immediate connection to those affected by what had originally been dubbed GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency), but was renamed AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in August 1982.⁵⁷ Indeed, New York was one of the three epicentres of HIV infection and subsequent AIDS-related deaths in the United States throughout the worst of the AIDS crisis, alongside Los Angeles and San Francisco. As the AIDS crisis escalated in New York (with the first confirmed cases in 1980), it decimated the populations of male homosexuals and intravenous drug users in the downtown scene. Although not a regular user of intravenous drugs, Wojnarowicz was also intimately acquainted

⁵⁷ Jean Marx, 'A Virus by Any Other Name...' *Science*, 227 (1985), 1449-1451.

with the deaths and difficulties of addicts through his friends in the Cinema of Transgression, particularly Kern and Turner (both of whom struggled with heroin addiction), and from day to day life on the heroin-rich streets of the Lower East Side. Since Wojnarowicz's own death from AIDS-related illness in 1992, his practice has become, as Doyle writes, 'one of the most frequently referenced when writers need to distil what things were like' during that time.⁵⁸

After Hujar's death and as the AIDS crisis worsened in New York, Wojnarowicz's work shifted to a less abstract register, which as Cameron suggests 'meant leaving behind the familiar images and sensations from childhood and focusing instead on the very real crises facing him and his generation'.⁵⁹ The death of hundreds of friends, acquaintances and associates belonging to these overlapping demographic groups brought forth a much more explicit political dimension to his later work. This shift includes Wojnarowicz's later visual art, notably the memorial pieces *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988-89) and *Spirituality (for Paul Thek)* (1988), and the *Sex Series* of images (1988). Although reminiscent of his previous paintings, these multi-image works often had a denser visual aesthetic than his earlier work, incorporating multiple layers of text, collage and clusters of recycled images, often repurposed to speak directly to the AIDS crisis. These later political explorations after 1987, addressing his HIV diagnosis, the death of his friends and the sickness of the state are visually striking and complicated expressions of political rage, rather than the more prankish exercises in confrontation he explored in the Cinema of

⁵⁸ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. 130.

⁵⁹ Cameron, p. 22.

Transgression, or the more playful repurposing of imagery identified by Cameron in the earlier visual art made as part of the East Village Art scene. The ominous multimedia installation *America: Heads of Family/Heads of State* (1989/90), for example, was an enormous, blindfolded fibreglass head suspended above two TV monitors, papered with newspaper reports about the AIDS crisis and with the word 'QUEER' written across its forehead. A child's skeleton was placed on a bier of sticks in front of this altar to government neglect, ominously illustrating the effects of the media distortion of AIDS.

I argue however that the turn towards direct reference to the crisis does not represent an absolute break with the more humorous or irreverently subversive dimensions of his practice evident in his earlier work, and indeed that a look back to the post-punk foundation of his practice can offer useful insights into the development of the aesthetic of his later political protests. I find 3 Teens Kill 4's cover version of soul musicians Rufus and Chaka Khan's 'Tell Me Something Good', included on their album *No Motive*, a fascinating precursor to Wojnarowicz's later performance monologues and writing in its transgressive celebration of violence against political figures. The cover version combines the upbeat lyrics of the original song with the band's sparse, jerky instrumentation and overlaid audio snippets of a news bulletin detailing the 1981 assassination attempt against President Ronald Reagan.⁶⁰ I read the implication of this juxtaposition as being that the exhortation to

⁶⁰ 'Tell Me Something Good', 3 Teens Kill 4, *No Motive*. The original version of this song appears on Rufus's album *Rags to Rufus* (ABC Records, 1974).

be told 'something good' in the song's lyrics is fulfilled by the news of the attempt on Reagan's life.

In light of Carr's characterisation of Wojnarowicz's participation in the band, it seems probable that this news report, the 'bits from the radio' were his contribution to the cover version. This prefigures Wojnarowicz's deployment of the image of assassination in his later writing in relation to the government inaction to the AIDS crisis, which were both implied in suggestions that 'there's certain politicians that had better increase their security forces and there's health-care officials that had better get bigger fucking dogs' and described in explicit detail.⁶¹ Wojnarowicz's deployment of the imagery of political assassination therefore began before his shift to more explicit political denunciations of the establishment response to the AIDS crisis. The album was recorded and released in 1982, prior to the worst of the AIDS crisis and to Wojnarowicz's first direct experiences of the illness, which Carr suggests was the death of Nicholas Mouffarege in June 1985.⁶² The prefiguring of his attacks on 'many public figures' who have 'stood in the way of AIDS research and education' here offers a useful insight into the manner in which the post-punk context of the Lower East Side might have provided a tonal influence on Wojnarowicz's later fantasies of assassination when responding to the AIDS crisis in his writing.⁶³

⁶¹ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 162.

⁶² Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 285.

⁶³ Richard Bolton, 'Introduction', *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, ed. by Richard Bolton (New York: New Press, 1992), pp. 1-26 (p. 20).

Wojnarowicz's fantasies of revenge against the politicians he saw as responsible for the deprivation of funds and support to those affected by the crisis are vivid and righteously violent, whether his desire to douse '[Senator Jesse] Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire or throw congressman William Dannemeyer off the empire state building'.⁶⁴ These fantasies of political retribution are drawn from what is perhaps the artist's best-known piece of writing, 'Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell', first published in the catalogue for the exhibition 'Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing' (1989), curated by Nan Goldin and the site of Wojnarowicz's first major battle with censorship.⁶⁵ The essay, and particularly this passage, prompted a furore of political retribution against the artist and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Meyer writing that 'although Wojnarowicz's essay is fairly long' this passage was 'almost always mentioned in the press reports about the controversy'.⁶⁶ The congressional reaction resulted in the withdrawal of the funding for the exhibition by the NEA on the grounds that Wojnarowicz's writing was 'political rather than artistic in nature' (funding was later partially reinstated on the condition it did not fund the catalogue).⁶⁷ As Wojnarowicz's ex-gallerist, the writer and archivist Sur Rodney (Sur) suggests, it was this controversy that 'set off a funding firestorm and forever aligned Wojnarowicz with AIDS in the art world'.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 120.

⁶⁵ David, Wojnarowicz, 'Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell', *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, exh. cat. (New York: Artist's Space, 1989) pp. 6 – 11, Series I: Exhibition Files 1973-2009, Box 31, Folder 7, MSS291 Artist's Space Archive ca. 1973-2009, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

⁶⁶ Meyer, p. 245.

⁶⁷ NEA Correspondence, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (National Endowment for the Arts), Series I: Exhibition Files 1973-2009, Box 32, Folder 6, MSS291 Artist's Space Archive ca. 1973-2009, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

⁶⁸ Sur Rodney (Sur), 'Activism, AIDS, Art and the Institution', *ARTAIDSAMERICA* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015) pp. 74-82 (p. 76). Sur was codirector at Gracie Mansion Gallery, New York, Wojnarowicz's gallery from 1984 until its closure in 1989.

The reference to AIDS in the *VICE* caption is to the centrality of the AIDS crisis in the censorship battles that began with this essay, and Wojnarowicz's subsequent public identification with the crisis as an artist and activist. This political maelstrom of censorship, funding debates and media distortions indicate Wojnarowicz's centrality in the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 90s in the US, where right-wing politicians and conservative pressure groups attempted to dismantle public subsidy for the arts by attacking art they framed as corrupting or subversive. Bolton describes the Culture Wars as a 'battle between politicians and artists' ostensibly over government arts funding but really amounting to a debate 'over competing social agendas and concepts of morality' in relation to the representation of sexuality, bodies and transgression in art.⁶⁹

In the cover of 'Tell Me Something Good', the combination of cheerful if sparsely rendered music and the image of a political death of a loathed public figure prefigures Wojnarowicz's imagined renderings of the violent death of those he saw as responsible for the escalation of the crisis. In relation to the importance of post-punk to Wojnarowicz's later work then, it might be fruitful to position these later descriptions as inherently punk gestures as well, confrontational images presented with a similar sense of 'gleeful outrage and exaggerated punk aggression'.⁷⁰ As Meyer writes, the passage that fantasises about the assassination of Dannemeyer and Helms is 'purposefully obscene and strategically incendiary' – an inherently

⁶⁹ Bolton, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Jack Sargeant, 'Spitting with a Mouthful of Black Stones', *You Killed Me First*, pp. 27-33 (pp. 29-30).

punk strategy, I would add, reflecting the commitment to challenge and confrontation to the listener/reader inherent with it.⁷¹ Dave Laing suggests that the lyrics of punk songs often involved ‘the shock of the new (importation of obscenity, politics, etc. in to popular lyrics)’, thereby ‘confronting an audience with unexpected or unfamiliar material’, operations that can clearly be seen in both the descriptions of violence from Wojnarowicz’s essay in the *Witnesses* catalogue and the juxtaposition of Reagan’s assassination and the upbeat lyrics of ‘Tell Me Something Good’.⁷² To see both within a context of transgressive imagery within the post-punk scene, akin to Lunch’s lyrics, does not undo their status as a ‘defiance of repressive attitudes concerning AIDS and sexuality’.⁷³ Instead, it provides a new understanding of this imagery as also reflecting the post-punk scene’s staging of violent reactions against repressive models of social interaction, which were operative before the AIDS crisis gave them a new political purchase.

In addition to the shift towards a more political stance in his artistic practice, Wojnarowicz also participated publicly in actions by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and other groups, attending protests and railing publicly against conservative politicians for preventing access to healthcare and offering little-to-no support to those affected by the crisis. Wojnarowicz was one of the hundreds arrested at the FDA protest on 11 October 1988, wearing a jacket which was stencilled with the slogan ‘If I die of AIDS – Forget Burial – Just Drop My Body on the

⁷¹ Meyer, p. 245.

⁷² Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Oakland: PM Press, 2015), p. 98.

⁷³ Meyer, p. 246.

Steps of the F.D.A'.⁷⁴ Variations on this image resurfaced in his writing and performance throughout this later period of activism, the concept of activists leaving their dead on the steps of government buildings providing a vivid illustration of the anger and pain felt by those affected by the crisis.

Wojnarowicz's image of friends, lovers and neighbours taking the body of those who died due to AIDS to 'blast through the gates of the white house [...] and dump their lifeless form on the front steps' went on to inspire the famous ACT UP *Ashes Action*, a political funeral where ashes of the dead were thrown over the fence of the White House and other Federal buildings.⁷⁵ The monologue in which this image appears is included in *Close to the Knives*, which was collated and published after the artist's own diagnosis as HIV-positive in 1988, and was repeated in performances like *ITSOFOMO* and other benefit events.⁷⁶ The importance of this image to ACT UP and AIDS activists is illustrated by the text 'Bury Me Furiously' by Mark Lowe Fisher, where he writes Wojnarowicz's 'words sharpen my thoughts and plan [...] to make the public statement that my death from AIDS is a form of political assassination'.⁷⁷ Tom Rauffenbart, Wojnarowicz's partner, threw some of the artist's ashes over the fence of the White House in October 1996.⁷⁸ The AIDS crisis, and the artist's rage at government inaction and grief are then vital parts of a matrix of factors in

⁷⁴ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 400.

⁷⁵ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 122.

⁷⁶ Wojnarowicz performed excerpts from this essay for an ACT UP benefit shortly before his death in 1992. See Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 1.

⁷⁷ Mark Lowe Fisher, 'Bury Me Furiously', <<http://www.actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html>> [accessed 17 July 2017].

⁷⁸ See Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 578.

understanding Wojnarowicz's work. What I have argued in this section is that they can easily be sustained alongside, and perhaps enriched by, a concurrent examination of the post-punk influence on his artistic strategies as well.

A Critical Hook

In my introduction to this thesis, I suggest that the post-punk polymathy of my case studies fosters a certain kind of critical marginality, a rationale for why their practices are not particularly well known or comprehensively analysed by scholars and critics. This may not be obvious in the case of Wojnarowicz, as since his death he has actually achieved a relatively high level of critical and public recognition. In 2017, Wojnarowicz's artwork is better known, is more widely circulated and has a market value much higher than during his lifetime.⁷⁹ The publication of Carr's major biography, the previously referenced *Fire in the Belly*, is another indicator of the increased visibility of Wojnarowicz and his practice in a public context.⁸⁰ Perhaps the clearest sign of his increased profile within the art world is a forthcoming major retrospective of Wojnarowicz's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art due to open in 2018, a prestigious honour for any artist.

⁷⁹ Wojnarowicz's painting *History Keeps Me Awake at Night* (1986), for example, was sold at Christie's auction house for \$122,500 in 2012, at almost twice the highest estimated value. More information on the increased value of Wojnarowicz's work is available via the Blouin Art Sales Index at http://artsalesindex.artinfo.com/asi/search/David_Wojnarowicz/artistProfile.ai?artistID=192614 [accessed 26 January 2017].

⁸⁰ Carr's book achieved a high level of public exposure for an artistic biography, including appearances on 'best of' 2012 lists by the *New York Times* and *Newsday*.

My question remains, though, whether this increased public profile articulates the multiple political and subcultural resonances of the various strategies and mediums encompassed by Wojnarowicz's practice. At this point of new visibility for the artist, it is important to reassert the importance of interrelations between the different instances of filmmaking, writing, painting and activism he undertook, and to the multiple vectors of political critique that emerge from the contexts that generate those interrelations. This ensures that any increased profile avoids being one that reduces the artist's relevance to a set series of issues and limited range of contexts, ones that are used to render it readable in a public context and may also colour subsequent critical reflection. Throughout this thesis I maintain, and attempt to demonstrate, the necessity of engagement with the full multiplicity of the practices of artists who might be judged polymathic, like Wojnarowicz.

Cameron (writing in 1999) suggests that it has been difficult for audiences to 'connect Wojnarowicz the writer [...] to Wojnarowicz the painter [...] to Wojnarowicz the photographer' as artists 'generally limited their range of artistic investigation to either social issues or aesthetic ones, but rarely both'.⁸¹ He goes on to explain that he sees two reasons for this: because they are 'no longer used to seeing artists operate across different media at once' and because often those who do 'do so with a more consistent style' than Wojnarowicz.⁸² Cameron suggests then that the challenge of Wojnarowicz's practice is one partly of its polymathic nature, and how

⁸¹ Cameron, p. 4.

⁸² Cameron, p. 4.

the variation of medium, style and form within it can be rationalised and understood in a curatorial and critical context.

Certainly within a critical context, the project of analysing Wojnarowicz's practice has been one consistently in tension with the notion of separate disciplines, genres, and artistic labels. Cameron positions the efforts on the part of some 'critics, curators, and scholars to come to terms with the interdisciplinary core of his creativity' in contrast with his acknowledgement by the 'mainstream art world', which is less equipped or prepared to engage with what I call Wojnarowicz's polymathic practice, viewing it as 'mercurial and [...] too uneven'.⁸³ Cameron's identification of a small group of scholars attempting to engage with the interdisciplinary (or, as I prefer, polymathic) core of his practice corresponds to much of the scholarly work I have already referenced in my discussion of Wojnarowicz's work, including Cameron's own and that of Rizk, Carlin and Carr, as well as to the later work of Doyle, Laing and Lotringer.

Doyle similarly writes in 2006 that Wojnarowicz's polymathic output 'works against the grain of disciplining machineries of art historical and art critical writing [...] partly because Wojnarowicz worked across so many mediums, in collaboration with a range of artists, and contested the flow of art towards the commercial gallery system'.⁸⁴ I argue that the artist's challenge to these 'disciplining machineries' manifest themselves most clearly in the concise misrepresentations typically

⁸³ Cameron, pp. 1-3.

⁸⁴ Doyle, 'A Thin Line', p. 227.

afforded Wojnarowicz and his circle in aspiringly comprehensive instances of art history. What Amelia Jones has referred to as 'standard survey texts in English covering the chronological, social and aesthetic history of the development of contemporary art', are particularly revealing in this regard.⁸⁵ As Robert Jensen argues, analysis of these surveys is important and useful, as it is 'through just such texts that the profession of art history reaches its widest audience and therefore for which it ought to feel the greatest sense of responsibility'.⁸⁶ Such texts have an important role to play in both illustrating the position of an artist in the specialist field of art history, and communicating that position to the general public. Wojnarowicz is selectively identified within these survey texts, but it is almost exclusively his later political work that is discussed, rather than his earlier practice or his wider connections to a history of subcultural artistic practices, scenes and movements.

In the *October* group's historical survey of 20th century art, *Art Since 1900*, for example, the artist is mentioned briefly, twice. Neither observation points to the variety of his work, or his connection to the East Village/Lower East Side scene. The authors describe Wojnarowicz as one of the artists '[e]mpowered by ACT-UP' who 'explored homosexuality not only as a subjective experience that was essential in its nature [...] but also as a social construction subject to cultural and historical

⁸⁵ Amelia Jones, 'Writing Contemporary Art into History, A Paradox?', *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. by Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 3-16 (p. 4).

⁸⁶ Robert Jensen, 'Measuring Canons: Reflections on Innovation and the Nineteenth-century Canon of European Art', *Partisan Canons*, ed. by Anna Brzyski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-54 (p. 50).

variation'.⁸⁷ Despite the accuracy of this characterisation, the concerns of his work that engaged in other and complementary forms of social critique are not referenced. Neither do the authors refer to his connection to multiple social networks, to the East Village art scene, or to post-punk. Within this text there is no acknowledgement of the multi-faceted, polymathic practice of Wojnarowicz, nor of his subject matter outside of the contexts of his sexuality and/or his activism. His work is positioned as relating only to one aspect of his personal history.

As I reference in my introduction, Rosalind Krauss (and the *October* group she is a founding member of) undertake analysis that, whilst not bound by medium per se, nevertheless is still often bound by notions of what work is or should be included within their analytical remit, and how to characterise it. This is a problem highlighted by Jones in her critical review of *Art Since 1900* in *Art Bulletin*, where she suggests that the author's 'authoritative tone is brought weirdly to bear' on politically charged art practices like Wojnarowicz's, suggesting that the 'more subtle insights offered by these are not addressed'.⁸⁸ Together, writes Jones, this amounts to a 'general methodological suspicion of the subjective, accompanied by an erasure of the specificity of bodies and desires'.⁸⁹ This suspicion of subjectivity corresponds to Doyle's observation that it is easy to dismiss the 'affective charge' of the work of an artist like Wojnarowicz if it 'appears as autobiographical, and as therefore not representative of anything other than the artist himself'.⁹⁰ This is a familiar anxiety

⁸⁷ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), p. 608

⁸⁸ Amelia Jones, 'Reviews: *Art Since 1900*', *Art Bulletin*, 88, pp. 373-389 (p. 378).

⁸⁹ Jones, 'Interventions Reviews: *Art Since 1900*', p. 377.

⁹⁰ Doyle, 'A Thin Line', p. 227.

in relation to Wojnarowicz, as represented by his own abandonment of the East Village scene due to its determination to market his work through his biography (as an 'ex street hustler').

This perhaps also reflects a wider disinterest in the idea of a subcultural community or of post-punk as an influential factor in the development of visual art. The authors seem to take a position that whilst a citation of Wojnarowicz's vital contribution to debates around identity and censorship in visual art might be important in such a historical survey, the concurrent recognition of it as being part of a broader continuum of oppositional or challenging artistic practice is not. In relation to Cameron's concept of changing style also presenting a difficulty for reflection, the formal qualities of his work (a sense of what it consists of, looks or feels like) and the relation of it to an assertion of social position are also absent from this consideration of the practice in terms of 'more of a life (cut short) than a movement'.⁹¹

Irving Sandler, for example, bemoans the post-punk aesthetic of the Lower East Side and East Village artists, as 'an art based more than ever before on anarchic and infantile influences, an any-one-can-do-it aesthetic and the trivialities of mass culture' in his compendious survey text *Art of the Postmodern Era* (1996).⁹² Craig Owens similarly suggests that East Village Art was concerned with the marketing of 'subcultural productions (graffiti, cartooning and other vernacular expressions) or

⁹¹ Doyle, 'A Thin Line', p. 227.

⁹² Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 462.

other puerile imitations of them'.⁹³ It is clear then for both Sandler and Owens there had been little value in the subcultural dimension of the scene. Sandler contrasts what he terms 'bad' painting with 'fine' art, and writes that 'Neo-"bad" painting was identified with a generation of artists who lived and worked in Manhattan's Lower East Side'.⁹⁴ The subcultural nuance of the scene is then dismissed on the basis of a value judgement that is naturalised in Sandler's seemingly uncritical distinction between the 'fine' and the merely 'bad'. His dismissals of the work as being 'in bad taste and artless' signifies his certainty in what constitutes good art, and his acceptance of those criteria.⁹⁵

These kinds of conservative disciplinary approaches are the distortions and oversights that confine artists like Wojnarowicz to a particular position within dominant disciplinary narratives. This is important to acknowledge and challenge. As Griselda Pollock writes:

we must attend to both the level of enunciation – what is said in discourses and done in practices in museums and galleries – and to the level of effect, that is how what is said articulates hierarchies, norms, asserting elite white male heterosexual domination and privilege as 'common sense' and insisting that anything else is an unaesthetic aberration: bad art, politics instead of

⁹³ Craig Owens, 'The Problem with Puerilism', *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, ed. by Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 263-267 (p. 265).

⁹⁴ Sandler, p.461

⁹⁵ Sandler, p. 464

art, partisanship instead of universal values, motivated expression instead of disinterested truth and beauty'.⁹⁶

Although specifically addressing how these valuations effect women artists, Pollock articulates a criticism that could also relate to my account of the dismissal of post-punk and East Village Art as important; her identification of the insistence that anything else is an 'unaesthetic aberration: bad art' mapping neatly on to Sandler's parallel canons of 'bad' and 'fine' art. The criteria on which the success of these strategies should be judged is not necessarily the formal criteria of art historians like Sandler, but ones derived from an appreciation and engagement with the artist's own articulation of their practice in relation to its actual manifestation in the artworks themselves. What Doyle refers to as a 'vertical' art history, the preoccupation with a genealogical progression, 'dedicated to the critical enterprise of tracking Art's direction and projecting Art's future', is perhaps poorly placed to explore other contexts of subcultural connection, 'the fleshy and complicated friendships, collaborations and romances between artists'.⁹⁷

In the case of Wojnarowicz, the factors that are identified as being characteristic of the resistance of artists to accommodation by the art world into critical narratives – making work unconstrained by a medium, collaborating with other artists and peers and the embracing of alternative venues – are synonymous with post-punk subcultures generally and the Lower East Side in particular. To both Doyle and

⁹⁶ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 10.

⁹⁷ Doyle, 'A Thin Line', p. 229.

Cameron the polymathic nature of Wojnarowicz's practice, the breadth of forms in which he produced work and his subcultural resistance to incorporation or accommodation within the art world presents a difficulty to writers like Sandler, Owens or the *October* group to articulate the full breadth of his practice, and the multiple traditions and contexts with which he is connected.

This corresponds to Doyle's later observation that

There is a tendency in art criticism to feel one must choose: style or politics, form or content. This is especially true for works whose style is grounded in popular and expressive genres. (In Wojnarowicz's case, that includes graffiti, punk, and DIY aesthetics).⁹⁸

Here Doyle, like Cameron, suggests then that the variety of media across Wojnarowicz's work, but also his particular style and tone, complicates the ability of commentators to write about him without identifying a critical 'hook', a central rationale upon which an artist's profile can 'hang'. For polymath artists like Wojnarowicz, whose wide range of undertakings often leaves them outside of the remit of individual genre critics, artistic disciplines, and academic departments, this process is frequently expressed in the emphasis of a single dimension of the artist's work as the unifying strategy of their roving practice – the lens through which their art is understood.

⁹⁸ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. 129.

Wojnarowicz's contemporary, the author Dennis Cooper, suggests that it is his censorship battles and his identification with activism in relation to the AIDS crisis that has provided this critical 'hook'. In a 1999 article for *Artforum*, Cooper argues that Wojnarowicz's 'political sheen' had 'given critics and curators a way to pigeonhole his work' after his death, and 'led them to misdiagnose his personal rage as the spearhead of a movement', to Wojnarowicz's exasperation.⁹⁹ This is a position that might correspond to Pollock's warning of the potential of dismissal as 'politics instead of art'.¹⁰⁰ Citing a 1985 street conversation with the artist in support of his argument, Cooper writes that Wojnarowicz's public engagement with the struggle against AIDS, his political activism and raw engagement with sexuality left Wojnarowicz's art 'probably doomed to an eternity spent in gay and/or AIDS themed group shows'.¹⁰¹ Cooper suggests that Wojnarowicz's engagement with AIDS in his later practice overdetermines the way his work is curated. That is, his identification with 'gay and/or AIDS themed group shows', makes it far harder for those reflecting on Wojnarowicz's full oeuvre – including work made before the onset of the crisis and his political mobilisation – to discuss earlier works in terms of a fuller range of political, social or cultural contexts, including post-punk.

In his more recent essay from 2015 *Sur Rodney (Sur)* illustrates a similar anxiety as Cooper in 1999, when he writes that Wojnarowicz

⁹⁹ Dennis Cooper, 'Odd Man Out', *Artforum*, 38 (October 1999), 130-131 and 168 (p. 131)

¹⁰⁰ Pollock, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Cooper, p. 131.

became a poster child in the ongoing AIDS warfare and continued to be – even more so – after his death in 1992. His critiques on organised religion, class struggle, nature and the environment, homophobia, dreams, and fears would all be collapsed into metaphors for AIDS to better serve his hugely profitable writing on the subject.¹⁰²

Sur's suggestion that the collapse of his work into a characterisation governed by AIDS is one which intersects with my analysis of the post-punk polymath. For Sur, it is Wojnarowicz's writing (a single aspect of his polymathic practice) that is privileged by this characterisation, overdetermining readings of the other mediums in which he made work. For the polymath, where the breadth and diversity of their work is a deliberate choice and strategy, this is especially problematic. Sur seems to suggest that the content of Wojnarowicz's political writing, directly engaging with the AIDS crisis, such as that in the *Witnesses* catalogue, overdetermines the other political resonances also present within his practice.

As suggested by the observations of Cooper and Sur, many scholars and figures intimately familiar and engaged with more expansive examinations of Wojnarowicz are uneasy with the conflation of the various wider political resonances at play within his practice and his later AIDS activism. There are other aspects of his practice not connected to this particular aspect of his political critique that are minimised in

¹⁰² Sur Rodney (Sur), p. 75.

that operation, with contexts and strategies misrepresented or subsumed within a narrative of the censorship battles produced by them.

As I document below, the censorship scandal around *A Fire in My Belly* reflects less what is present in the work of the artist but instead reveals a dialectic relationship between the artist's public profile and the popular press that perpetuate that scandal. Mainstream media outlets, such as national newspapers, may simply seek to establish the simplest outline of an artist for ease of reporting and clarity of story, and this is demonstrated by the coverage of the scandal. For Wojnarowicz, the work's potential relation to the AIDS crisis has become just such a defining factor in the writing devoted to him, particularly in the media coverage of his film's removal. I argue that this does not reflect the multiplicity of political and cultural resonances within his work.

Lippard writes that political art makes people think 'politically through images, but it may or may not inform the audience about specific events or solutions or rouse people to take action', whilst activist art is devoted to a specific goal and particular intent.¹⁰³ She goes on to suggest that Wojnarowicz managed to transcend this boundary, by having a practice that was both political (expansive, non-specific, not confined to a notion of direct efficacy) and activist (directly engaging with certain issues, most notably the AIDS crisis). This sense of multiplicity is undone by the censorship controversy generated around Wojnarowicz's work, fixing it to a

¹⁰³ Lippard, p. 49.

particular public characterisation, as solely activist rather than broadly political in the way Lippard suggests. His work embodies multiple vectors of political critique and subcultural resonance, but also at points addresses the specificities of particular situations, like the AIDS crisis.

As in Carlo McCormick's description of the problem of attempting to 'invent, or approximate, an imaginary, irrational coefficient figure' out the polymathic and multi-layered Wojnarowicz, I have attempted to articulate an understanding of his practice beyond a narrowed interpretation as an artist responding exclusively to the AIDS crisis.¹⁰⁴ Such an understanding represents a more comprehensive representation of the historical narrative of both his life and work. Wojnarowicz himself suggests in his writing and public statements that the sexually explicit content of his work (and perhaps also his status as a person with AIDS) might cause 'some people to see the word "Queer" somehow written across my forehead', and that this 'prevents some from hearing anything else I have to say, or [...] automatically discounts anything I have to say'.¹⁰⁵ I now turn to *A Fire in My Belly*, a work stamped in the media with the kind of reductive label that Wojnarowicz expresses an anxiety towards, as an illustration of how this reduction is still operative, long after his death and despite the greater awareness of his work in a public context.

A Fire in My Belly and Overdetermination

¹⁰⁴ McCormick, *Tongues of Flame*, p 12.

¹⁰⁵ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 150.

In late 2010 Wojnarowicz's unfinished short film *A Fire in My Belly* was removed from the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC. The film was removed following pressure from a religious lobbying group, the Catholic League, and from Congressional politicians, particularly leading Republican figures from the House of Representatives. Smithsonian secretary G. Wayne Clough was the official ultimately responsible for the removal, with the *Los Angeles Times* reporting that 'threats of budgetary consequences by House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Virginia) played into his decision', although also that his 'primary concern was preventing a media pile-on that would "hijack" the exhibition by turning the discussion away from the art on display and make it an excuse for a heated and polarising debate of tangential issues'.¹⁰⁶

A Fire in My Belly stages aspects of Wojnarowicz's personal iconography through footage largely shot on a trip to Mexico in 1986, with editing begun and then abandoned in early 1987. Wojnarowicz was a regular traveller and often used these trips to collect raw material for his artwork, through photography and film as well as finding plastic toys, tourist souvenirs and other objects to use for reference or inspiration. His journals and effects from 1986 include prayer cards, toys and drawings that echo the aesthetic of the film, speaking interestingly to the same

¹⁰⁶ G. Wayne Clough, cited in Mike Boehm, 'Smithsonian Chief Clough says his decision to remove AIDS video was hasty but not censorship', *Los Angeles Times*, 'Culture Monster', 21 January 2011, <<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/01/smithsonian-censorship-controversyclough.html>> [accessed 16 May 2014] (para. 3 of 6).

ethos of ‘availabism’ I identified in Chapter One amongst his contemporaries on the Lower East Side.¹⁰⁷ He was accompanied on the trip to Mexico by Tommy Turner, his collaborator in the Cinema of Transgression and member of Wojnarowicz’s social circle in New York. Although *A Fire in My Belly* was neither completed nor exhibited as a finished work, a 13-minute silent cut exists in Wojnarowicz’s archive, as well as a separate six-minute cut.¹⁰⁸ The footage included in *Hide/Seek* was not either of these two versions, but a new four-minute edit created after Wojnarowicz’s death by Bart Everly with the permission of the artist’s estate, and crucially, as I go on to discuss, featuring a new soundtrack drawn from archival material from 1989.¹⁰⁹

In all versions of the film, images captured in Mexico of homelessness and begging, burning and destroyed objects, religious iconography and totemic sexuality are collaged together without any easily discernible narrative, although Wojnarowicz’s 13-minute edit is divided into rough sections signalled by numbered images of a train and flashes of tarot cards in Spanish (The first section, for example is labelled ‘El Mundo’ or ‘the world’ and ‘La Sirena’, the siren). The film later includes an image of Mexican fire ants crawling over a selection of objects, including a cheap plastic crucifix placed on the rocky ground, and it was specifically this image that the

¹⁰⁷ Journals 1986-87: Europe and America, Series I: Journals, Box 1, Folder 18, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

¹⁰⁸ ‘A Fire in My Belly, a Work in Progress’, Digitized Super-8, 1986-7, Series X: Video and Film, Shelf: Media, ID:092.0179, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

¹⁰⁹ David Ng, ‘Getting the Facts Straight about Wojnarowicz’s ‘A Fire in My Belly’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2 February 2011, <<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/wojnarowicz-a-fire-in-my-belly-gets-a-closer-look.html>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para. 11 of 13).

Catholic League found offensive, labelling it 'hate speech'.¹¹⁰ As was common in Wojnarowicz's practice, much of the imagery from the film reappeared in his later paintings, photography and performance, particularly his *Ant Series* (1988-89) which were photographic prints of the various objects in the film covered with ants, excerpted from the *A Fire in My Belly* footage.

Wojnarowicz shot and edited the material that makes up *A Fire in My Belly* before his diagnosis as HIV-positive in 1988, and before the death of Hujar in November 1987, an event that, as I have already suggested, is generally seen to signal the shift in his practice towards addressing AIDS directly. *A Fire in My Belly* was being worked on during the period of artistic uncertainty on Wojnarowicz's part as the East Village Art scene began to falter in the mid-1980s. As Rauffenbart, Wojnarowicz's partner, remembers, prior to Hujar's death Wojnarowicz thought that 'he wasn't an important person in the art world anymore' and importantly also states that it was only later that Wojnarowicz began 'to deal with issues surrounding AIDS. By the time he really did all that stuff, Peter had died, Keith Davis had died [in July 1987], I was diagnosed, he was diagnosed'.¹¹¹

Despite the fact that the *A Fire in My Belly*'s (unfinished) production predates both Wojnarowicz' diagnosis and the death of his close friends, it has been consistently

¹¹⁰ William Donohue, President of the Catholic League, regularly referred to the video in the media as 'anti-Catholic hate speech'. An example can be seen during this Live Q&A with the *Washington Post*, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2010/12/01/DI2010120103809.html>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

¹¹¹ Tom Rauffenbart, cited in Sylvère Lotringer, 'Tom Rauffenbart [Interview]', *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, pp. 142-153 (p. 153).

positioned in narratives around its removal as a film that deals with personal anger at his diagnosis and the AIDS crisis more generally. For example, the late Martin Sullivan, director of the National Portrait Gallery at the time of *Hide/Seek*, unequivocally declared in a press statement that ‘the artist’s intention was to depict the suffering of an AIDS victim’ (also a phrase that is generally seen as regressive).¹¹² Much of the mainstream news articles relating to the removal of the work from the National Portrait Gallery (both those defending and condemning the work) presented *A Fire in My Belly* as a film that was either created specifically as a response to the AIDS crisis, or at least as a work to be read in relation to the artist’s activism. In a statement largely representative of the coverage, Holland Cotter, art critic for the *New York Times*, stated ‘[t]hat *A Fire in My Belly* is about spirituality, and about AIDS, is beyond a doubt’.¹¹³ Sebastian Smee, art critic for the *Boston Globe*, similarly wrote that ‘Wojnarowicz’s 1986–7 video is in part a response to the AIDS-related death of his friend and colleague Peter Hujar’.¹¹⁴ Robin Cembalest, executive editor of *ARTnews* (which refers to itself as the ‘oldest, and most widely circulated art magazine in the world’) also characterised the piece as ‘[p]art elegy, part rant about the pain and marginalization of AIDS patients’.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Martin Sullivan, ‘Statement on *Hide/Seek*: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture’, Press Release, 30 November 2010, <<http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/hide-seek-statment.pdf>> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para. 2 of 3).

¹¹³ Holland Cotter, ‘As Ants Crawl Over Crucifix, Dead Artist is Assailed Again’, *New York Times*, 10 December 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/11/arts/design/11ants.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all&> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para 14 of 20).

¹¹⁴ Sebastian Smee, ‘Offensive? ICA lets the public decide’, *Boston Globe*, 16 December 2010, <http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2010/12/16/offensive_ica_lets_the_public_decide/?page=1> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para. 7 of 11).

¹¹⁵ Robin Cembalest, ‘Between a Cross and a Hard Place’, *ARTnews*, 2 January 2011, <<http://www.artnews.com/2011/02/01/between-a-cross-and-a-hard-place/>> [accessed 30 April 2017] (para. 2 of 19). For *ARTnews*’ own description of its reach and significance see ‘About *ARTnews*’, <<http://www.artnews.com/about/>> [accessed 30 April 2017].

This characterisation was not restricted to newspapers and journalists. In a short reflection on the controversy for *Contemporary Theatre Review* Sam Biederman also described the film as ‘an angry reaction to the AIDS crisis’, for example.¹¹⁶ Even some time after the original controversy and responses which detail the ambiguity of this characterisation, in 2014 art historian Julia Skelly similarly stated ‘A Fire in My Belly is a video [...] which the artist (who died of AIDS in 1992) said symbolised the suffering of people with HIV/AIDS’, an incorrectly definitive statement that invokes Wojnarowicz’s voice explicitly in her misreading of the film.¹¹⁷ As the statements by Biederman and Skelly suggest, misrepresentations of *A Fire in My Belly* as being explicitly a film about AIDS are not limited to journalistic reports from the time, but also are sustained – albeit in brief – in references to the film in more serious scholarship. I raise a further conflation of the film and Wojnarowicz’s significance as an AIDS activist and artist responding to the crisis in my discussion of Lauren DeLand’s 2014 essay on the artist below.

The representation of the film as being ‘about’ AIDS is certainly incomplete, and derives predominantly from the re-edit and new soundtrack added for the exhibition. Other have noted this, such as Rachel P. Kreiter, who writes in her response to the controversy for the small online arts publication *burnaway*, that whilst it is true that ‘Wojnarowicz was eventually an HIV-positive gay man very

¹¹⁶ Sam Biederman, ‘Symbols Clashing: Controversy and Acceptance at the Smithsonian Gallery’, *Backpages, Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21 (2011), 367-369 (p. 367).

¹¹⁷ Julia Skelly, ‘Introduction: The Uses of Excess’, *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture 1600-2010*, ed. by Julia Skelly (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 1-18 (p. 18).

involved in ACT-UP, and the original cut likely carries some AIDS context, [...] that is not its only theme'.¹¹⁸ The positioning of the film in coverage of its removal continually pursued a narrow interpretation of it as directly related to both Wojnarowicz's and Hujar's death from AIDS, to the extent that the David Wojnarowicz Estate and PPOW Gallery (which handles the management of the estate) felt compelled to issue a clarification document. This was first referenced in an early 2011 article in the *Wall Street Journal* and subsequently published in full on the *Los Angeles Times* culture blog in February 2011. Point four of eight reads:

A Fire in My Belly was not created as an homage to Peter Hujar. In fact, it is questionable if it was created as a response to AIDS. It predates Wojnarowicz's finding out he was HIV positive and the change in his work that reflects his status.¹¹⁹

PPOW showed Wojnarowicz's work throughout the 1990s both before and after his death, and so represent direct colleagues of the artist. The document therefore illustrates a perception among those who worked closely with the artist that the work was being misrepresented within the media narratives around its removal.

Hide/Seek was billed as the first major exhibition to 'chart the influence of gay and lesbian artists on modern American portraiture' and featured artworks from the

¹¹⁸ Rachel P. Kreiter, 'Editing Wojnarowicz's A Fire in My Belly Distracts from Larger Themes', *burnaway*, 3 March 2011, <<http://burnaway.org/feature/editing-wojnarowicz-a-fire-in-my-belly-distracts-from-larger-themes/>> [accessed 20 April 2017] (para. 10 of 12).

¹¹⁹ Ng, 'Getting the Facts Straight' (para. 9 of 13).

turn of the 20th century to 2010 that explored, or were related to, various aspects of sexual difference.¹²⁰ The exhibition's attempt to reevaluate and examine the importance of sexuality in American art ('portraiture' was used in a loose and flexible manner) was undertaken in part to underscore 'the hypocrisy of the current post-Mapplethorpe anxiety about referencing same-sex desire in the museum world'.¹²¹ The reference to Mapplethorpe here refers to the Culture Wars, in which the photographer's exhibition *The Perfect Moment* in 1988/9 was the subject of a tabloid outcry and used by right wing politicians as an illustration of the unsuitable nature of the art being funded by the NEA. The political battle around Mapplethorpe's work signalled the beginning of the period of censorship and assault on the arts in which Wojnarowicz's work was also deeply entangled.

As Wojnarowicz himself writes, it was a time of 'hysteria surrounding the actions of the repulsive senator from zombieland [Jesse Helms] who has been trying to dismantle the NEA for supporting the work of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe'.¹²² *Hide/Seek's* goal to challenge institutional conservatism would be ironically underscored by the Smithsonian's removal of Wojnarowicz's work, brought about by pressure from Republican Congressmen (Boehner, Cantor, et al) and conservative religious campaigners (the Catholic League), and through the unwillingness of the institution (of which the National Portrait Gallery is part) to fight to keep the piece on display as part of the show.

¹²⁰ Martin E. Sullivan, 'Foreword', Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010), p. 9.

¹²¹ Jonathan D. Katz, 'Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture', *Hide/Seek*, pp. 10-61 (p. 15).

¹²² Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 119.

After the withdrawal of the film, several artists, commentators and other institutions publicly condemned the removal and accused the Smithsonian Institution of self-censorship and susceptibility to special political interests. The artist AA Bronson requested his work *Felix, June 5th 1994* (1994/99), a deathbed portrait of his lover and collaborator Felix Partz that directly and emphatically addresses the AIDS crisis be removed from the exhibition; James T. Bartlett resigned from the National Portrait Gallery's advisory board, and several institutions protested the censorship with direct action, screening the film in special events or declaring their intention to deny future funding from the Smithsonian. Both the Andy Warhol Foundation and the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation announced they would no longer offer funds to support future Smithsonian exhibitions.¹²³ These protests by artists, commentators and institutions, and the media attention devoted to the withdrawal and its effects recalled the censorship issues Wojnarowicz faced before his death in 1992, and thus became in 2010-11 a major flashpoint in newly resurgent debates around censorship. As Doyle suggests however, whilst this publicity, 'letter-writing campaigns, teach-ins, and public statements from museum directors increased awareness' they also 'failed to forward a meaningful conversation about Wojnarowicz's work'.¹²⁴

¹²³ Kriston Capps, 'Mapplethorpe Foundation Withdraws Support for Smithsonian Exhibitions', *Washington City Paper*, 17 December 2010, <<http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/artsdesk/visual-arts/2010/12/17/mapplethorpe-foundation-withdraws-support-for-smithsonian-exhibitions/>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

¹²⁴ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. 141.

In the last part of this chapter, I will use the controversy around *A Fire in My Belly* to take up Doyle's charge to further the conversation about this particular artwork by Wojnarowicz, one that has been at the centre of a censorship scandal reminiscent of the Culture Wars. As Doyle writes, '[a]rt controversy invariably simplifies its object', with scandal and public debate ensuring that 'discussion of the work will be organised by the controversy it provoked and not by the need to come to grips with the work itself'.¹²⁵ Therefore, I enact a reading of the film that positions it in relation to Wojnarowicz's concept of the 'pre-invented world', and proposes the post-punk film movement of the Cinema of Transgression as a missing context for discussion of the work. I propose this as a counter to the way political and media scandal related to the artist may have the effect of 'fixing' meaning or obscuring this dimension of his practice, a representation of the critical operation I refer to above in relation to Cooper, Sandler, Sur and Pollock.

Conflation and Didacticism

The definition of *A Fire in My Belly* through public controversy is perhaps an example of what Jonathan Katz refers to as the catechism of the Culture Wars, 'art=gay=AIDS'.¹²⁶ Katz writes in his essay 'The Senators Were Revolted: Homophobia and the Culture Wars' about a similarly censored and targeted work, *Piss Christ* (1987) by American artist Andres Serrano, noting the way it visualises 'the

¹²⁵ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. xiv.

¹²⁶ Jonathan D. Katz, "'The Senators Were Revolted': Homophobia and the Culture Wars', in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, pp. 231-248 (p. 238).

unholy alliance of (homo)sexuality and religion'.¹²⁷ *Piss Christ* consists of a photograph of a crucifix (similar to the one covered by ants in *A Fire in My Belly*) suspended in the artist's urine. This contentious pairing of bodily fluids and religious iconography opened the piece to censorship and severe condemnation from religious groups and associated political interests. Writing specifically about the condemnation of sexual and bodily themes in US art of the late 1980s, Katz argues that censors and detractors conflate any combination of sexual bodies and social critique with AIDS, 'for the right's central discourse of defensive containment has long required threatening "others" to define itself against'.¹²⁸ Although here writing on *Piss Christ* in 2006, it is interesting to note that Katz was also the co-curator of *Hide/Seek* in 2010.

Katz makes that the point that 'it wasn't really the art itself that conservative wing of the Republican party and its Christian fellow travellers were after' in the Culture Wars, but 'rather that which the art came to denote or stand in for'.¹²⁹ This point is particularly apt in relation to the later controversy of *A Fire in My Belly*'s removal, a work that has come to stand in for Wojnarowicz's militant activism, despite its arguable relation to it. This allows it to be drawn in to the art=gay=AIDS equation, an operation that ensures a 'conceptual slippage between art, homosexuality, and AIDS, the terms "infecting" one another with unchecked discursive promiscuity'.¹³⁰ In Wojnarowicz's case this process of 'infection' or simplification takes a practice

¹²⁷ Katz, p. 238.

¹²⁸ Katz, p. 234.

¹²⁹ Katz, p. 234.

¹³⁰ Katz, p. 238.

purposefully varied in both content and execution and fixes its meaning, its relevance, and its position within a confined political imperative rather than a general constellation of concerns and social outlook.

In an essay published after the Hide/Seek debacle which reflects this, Lauren DeLand expounds her concept of a 'useful corpse' in relation to Wojnarowicz and ACT UP, arguing (in a positive sense) that:

Wojnarowicz's own body was appropriated, in his life and after his death [...] by startlingly different factions in the interlinked battles over the allotment of public funds in America, to first enable people with HIV and AIDS to live and, second, to support the production and distribution of works of art that confront directly the country's fraught relationship with its own sexual landscape.¹³¹

DeLand is however quick to acknowledge that 'useful corpse' is an unsettling term that would disturb friends, lovers and relatives of those labelled as such. DeLand qualifies her use by describing it as a term which reflects several specific examples of AIDS activism, and also claiming to not 'romanticize this strategy'.¹³² However, DeLand's essay still deploys the *figure* of Wojnarowicz as representing a 'useful corpse', rather than specific examples of work contextualised in their particular historical moment. Although making a specific point about the symbolic strategies of

¹³¹ Lauren DeLand, 'Live Fast, Die Young, Leave a Useful Corpse', *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 19:1 (2014), 33-40, p. 34

¹³² DeLand, p. 34

artistic AIDS protest, DeLand's references Wojnarowicz's artworks, such as *A Fire in My Belly* and *Untitled (Genet, after Brassai)* (a collaged portrait of the French author produced in 1979 at the same time as the Rimbaud images) within her framing of Wojnarowicz as a 'useful corpse' without acknowledging the ambiguity of those work's relationship to AIDS. The danger may be that her characterisation then contributes to his reduction to *just* a useful corpse, or, as she herself later writes, 'a didactic for others to wield in resisting their own culturally imposed imperative to vanish'.¹³³

I challenge this not to negate DeLand's reading nor the potency and relevance of Wojnarowicz's 'didactic' use. DeLand establishes persuasively the didactic use of Wojnarowicz's practice, but my concern is that such an approach might leave little room for the enunciation of alternative readings of his work. If Wojnarowicz is seen only in relation to our contemporary knowledge of his engagement with the AIDS crisis, as a useful corpse, then the work itself falls out of view. My project, in part is to reanimate the work within its context of production, exploring its affective charge in the moment of its creation, rather than consider its value when considered 'dead'. In the case of *A Fire in My Belly*, the controversy has overwritten its specific historical context, and subsequently its connection to the wider political project of the artist. As Anderson points to the difficulty of attempting to explore pre-AIDS contexts in her discussion of the images of the cruising spaces of the waterfront piers, 'our contemporary knowledge [of HIV/AIDS] haunts these photographs', and I

¹³³ DeLand, p. 40

argue a similar 'haunting' occurs in relation to *A Fire in My Belly*.¹³⁴ As Cynthia Carr explains of the film, his 'detractors called it blasphemous and sacrilegious; his defenders said it was all about AIDS. But it was neither [...] he had plenty to say about AIDS. But not in this film'.¹³⁵

Alternative Readings of *A Fire in My Belly*

What then is *A Fire in My Belly*, if not an angry reaction to the AIDS related death of Peter Hujar or Wojnarowicz's own diagnosis? How might Doyle's charge that 'those of us who defend [controversial or censored art] often do so at the cost of actually confronting the work itself' be addressed without similarly fixing its meaning to a narrow interpretation of the artist's imagined intentions?¹³⁶ To conclude this chapter, I will now undertake a close reading of the film that highlights and explores the other contexts that are relevant to it. Whilst Doyle's critical project of asserting the viability of emotional connection with Wojnarowicz's work is not my primary concern, her argument that it is vital to 'acknowledge what the work actually *does*' remains persuasive.¹³⁷ What does *A Fire in My Belly* contain, refer to and reflect other than the understanding put forward in the media coverage?

¹³⁴ Anderson, p. 137. Anderson suggests here that these photographs are re-contextualised by a viewer's later knowledge of the AIDS crisis that decimated the cruising underground represented by the figures within them. I see the content of Wojnarowicz's film as being re-contextualised by the censorship and media scandals related to the AIDS crisis that have subsequently become a defining historical characteristic of his work and the focus for extensive scholarly reflection. Accounting for and acknowledging this operation is not intended to minimise the importance of these readings but highlight their relation to Katz's 'catechism'.

¹³⁵ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p.2

¹³⁶ Doyle, *Hold it Against Me*, p. xiv.

¹³⁷ Doyle, *Hold it Against Me*, p. xvii.

In contrast to the media coverage, Wojnarowicz himself claimed that the film actually 'deals with ancient myth and its modern counterpart. It explores structures of power and control'.¹³⁸ Whilst this might encompass his rage towards the then-developing AIDS crisis, this is not the only available reading of the work.

Wojnarowicz' preoccupation with control, subliminal and explicit power structures, and what he referred to as the 'pre-invented world', are also clearly expressed.¹³⁹ As I refer to above, this concept was, as Carr writes 'what he called "the wall of illusion surrounding society and its structures" – false history, false spirituality, government control'.¹⁴⁰ This dissatisfaction with the dominant culture of the society

Wojnarowicz found himself living calls back again to my framing of the Lower East Side milieu as a subculture whose members were concerned with distinction from their parent culture, 'a circle of people were attracted to forms and expressions of violence because these things contained a truth when viewed or experienced against a backdrop of [A]merica'.¹⁴¹ The film speaks also to Wojnarowicz's belief that travelling 'into primitive cultures [Mexico, for Wojnarowicz] allows one a sudden and clear view of the Other World', that place where he had 'always felt like an alien'.¹⁴² I would argue in our current technologically-governed and globalised neoliberal society, his formulation of the 'pre-invented world' seems more apt than ever, and the reading of his work in relation to it rich and current.

¹³⁸ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p.357.

¹³⁹ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, pp. 87-88.

¹⁴⁰ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 328.

¹⁴¹ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 172.

¹⁴² Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, p. 88.

The first step in undertaking this alternative reading of *A Fire in My Belly* must be clarifying which version is being referred to, especially in the case of the reaction to the *Hide/Seek* scandal. I refer to the film shown at the National Portrait Gallery as the 'Smithsonian edit', acknowledging its truncated length and the inclusion of a new soundtrack. The two edits produced by Wojnarowicz (thirteen and six minute versions) should also both be referred to separately. And as defined in the clarification document issued by the Wojnarowicz estate, the footage used by Rosa Von Praunheim in *Silence=Death* (1990) should not be referred to as *A Fire in My Belly*.¹⁴³ Of course, despite their differences, the three versions of *A Fire in My Belly* and the excerpt from *Silence=Death* share much of the same footage and individual images.

Historically questionable explanations of the film's content, such as those by Skelly, Sullivan, Cembalest and Biederman, may at the simplest level reflect the unfinished nature of the film, and the subsequent reuse of footage and excerpts by Wojnarowicz and other artists. It is certainly possible that this has coloured the public and critical reception of many of the images. Wojnarowicz gave seven minutes to Von Praunheim for inclusion in *Silence=Death*, in which it was redubbed with a new soundtrack drawn from Diamanda Galás' *Plague Mass*, for example.¹⁴⁴ Both of Wojnarowicz's own edits are silent, after, as Carr reports, the soundtrack created by Wojnarowicz with his 3 Teens Kill 4 band mate Doug Bressler (which,

¹⁴³ Ng, 'Getting the Facts Straight' (para. 12 of 13).

¹⁴⁴ Diamanda Galás, *Plague Mass* (Mute Records, 1991). The live album was commercially released in 1991, but recorded in 1990.

reflecting the post-punk aural aesthetic of the band combined guitar with street noise and other found sound) was discarded in early 1987.¹⁴⁵

The use of Galás' music, which was written specifically as a reply to the epidemic, as a soundtrack in *Silence=Death* explicitly relates the film's imagery to AIDS by their combination. The lyrics, which refer to 'plague', 'the unclean' and mass funerals are obviously evocative of the AIDS crisis, and *Plague Mass* is in any case a well-known and widely referenced artistic response to the epidemic.¹⁴⁶ The combination of *Plague Mass* and the film explicitly pursue a reading of its imagery in relation to AIDS. That is on top of the placement in the wider film, which is a presentation of several New York artists' reactions to AIDS and the political discourse around it. Wojnarowicz appears alongside Allen Ginsberg, Bern Boyle, Keith Haring and Paul Smith, and reads several passages of writing from his later period which fiercely engage with his anger at the AIDS crisis. The title, *Silence=Death* is itself one of the slogans used by ACT UP in its protests and activities. It is clear then that in this particular context the footage from *A Fire in My Belly* is placed in direct relation to the AIDS crisis, and that it has a powerful resonance (identified by both Wojnarowicz and Von Praunheim, as signified by its inclusion) to those issues in such a context.

Like the footage used in *Silence=Death*, the Smithsonian edit of *A Fire in My Belly* combines the footage with a new soundtrack, composed using audio drawn from

¹⁴⁵ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, p. 358.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Nicholas Chare and D. Ferrett's interview with Gálás, 'Entwined Voices: An Interview with Diamanda Gálás' *Parallax*, 13:1 (2007) 65-73, for references to *Plague Mass* and its relation to the AIDS crisis.

Wojnarowicz's archive, specifically a tape recording of a 1989 ACT UP demonstration. The Wojnarowicz estate explains that 'this soundtrack was not part of the artist's original work and/or vision and probably has led people to think that *Fire in My Belly* was about the AIDS crisis'.¹⁴⁷ The chanting throughout this new soundtrack certainly adds a new dimension to the footage shown. The image of the crucifix crawling with ants, for example, appears much more confrontational when paired with the chant 'One, Two, Three, Four. Civil rights or civil war!' on the soundtrack of the Smithsonian edit. I would argue that the newly added soundtrack leaves the image far less open to interpretation than the silent edit from the Wojnarowicz archive. Through the chanting the ant-covered crucifix is reframed as a direct challenge to the church, appearing perhaps as though the cross were torn down and cast into the ant's nest.

The same image in Wojnarowicz's silent six-minute edit does not have this violent connotation: the ants slowly moving over the crucifix appear to me more an expression of their nature than of rage (circumventing obstacles as a group, etc.). Wojnarowicz himself said that his use of animal imagery was often meant as a way of 'breaking down the distance between humans and nature. I look into the animal world and find counterparts to the technological/human world'.¹⁴⁸ This reading does not negate the image of ants on the cross as an iconoclastic gesture, but may open up other idea concerning the relation between the human and non-human. Mysoon Rizk has explored this dimension of Wojnarowicz's practice usefully in relation to

¹⁴⁷ Wojnarowicz Estate, cited in Ng, 'Getting the Facts Straight' (para. 11 of 13).

¹⁴⁸ Wojnarowicz, cited in Blinderman, *Tongues of Flame*, p. 58.

other works, as when she suggests that his ‘zoomorphic allusions’ catalyse ‘anachronistic associations while manifesting the vulnerabilities of being a desiring mortal’ in relation to Wojnarowicz’s concept of a pre-invented world.¹⁴⁹

Referring to the *Ant Series*, in interview the artist directly references the ‘Mexican photographs with the coins and the clock and the gun and the Christ figure’, images from the series that appear in *A Fire in My Belly* and are direct prints from the Super 8 film within this context.¹⁵⁰ Wojnarowicz explains that he uses ‘the ants as a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours. [...] So I just took simple symbols, things that preoccupy us: money, time, religion, violence’.¹⁵¹ His explanation suggests that the image is a rather more subtle and gentle metaphor than is suggested by the new soundtrack on the Smithsonian edit, audio drawn from the polarised setting of a demonstration.

Wojnarowicz’s reference to the pictures as the ‘Mexican photographs’ is particularly interesting. Noticeably much of the specifically Mexican imagery has been excised from the Smithsonian edit, stripping a level of context present in Wojnarowicz’s own six and thirteen-minute cuts. The Smithsonian edit lacks all the footage of maps included in Wojnarowicz’s thirteen-minute edit, an especially surprising omission in that maps were such a consistent visual element in Wojnarowicz’s work. Maps appear as a recurring motif throughout Wojnarowicz’s visual art, particularly during

¹⁴⁹ Mysoon Rizk, ‘Looking at “Animals in Pants”: The Case of David Wojnarowicz’, *Topia*, 21 (2009), 137-159 (p. 155).

¹⁵⁰ Wojnarowicz, cited in Blinderman, *Tongues of Flame*, p. 58.

¹⁵¹ Wojnarowicz, cited in Blinderman, *Tongues of Flame*, p. 58.

his East Village Art period, and were frequently used as the base layer of collages and paintings, as in the painting he completed inspired by the trip to Mexico, *Tommy's Illness/Mexico City* (1987).¹⁵²

A tight zoom in to a broad map of Mexico opens the thirteen-minute cut, deliberately and decisively fixing the location of the footage. The other visibly Mexican imagery, the tarot cards that intersperse each rough section in both the thirteen and six-minute Wojnarowicz edits, are also missing from the Smithsonian edit (the tarot cards are printed in Spanish, and have a distinctly Mexican colour palette). Included in Wojnarowicz's notes on the film contained in his 1986 diary is a prayer card picked up on the trip to Mexico, which features Christ's stigmata represented in an extremely similar colour palette to the film.¹⁵³ This geographically contextualising material is conspicuous by its absence. Mexico in fact provides an important context to the gaudy plastic crucifix, as when seen within the context of the other plastic toys and touristic ephemera the images of the cross seem markedly less confrontational and sacrilegious.

The use of religious kitsch, cheap toys and souvenirs is commonplace throughout Wojnarowicz's work, and his archive holds many examples of his collecting and use of these items as examples of consumer society and representations of the 'pre-invented world'. During my examination of his archive, I found many examples of

¹⁵² Many other works feature maps, including *Untitled (Burning Child)* (1984), *Fuck You Faggot Fucker* (1984), *Something from Sleep* (1988/89) and *Globe of the United States* (1990).

¹⁵³ Journals 1986-87: Europe and America, Series I: Journals, Box 1, Folder 18, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

Wojnarowicz's personal collection of totems. Most significant amongst these was his *Magic Box*, a wooden crate containing several examples of the same kinds of objects, which were collected and placed under his bed in an almost ritualistic manner. Included in the box are toys, such as plastic insects and a miniature cowboy figurine, necklaces and crystals, and a selection of prayer cards like those in his 1986 diary entry.¹⁵⁴ Whilst the significance of this box to the artist is not documented, his partner Rauffenbart describes him keeping it under his bed and never discussing 'its function or significance'.¹⁵⁵ However, Wojnarowicz's journals are full of sketches and references to strikingly similar toys and ephemera, and to their centrality to his practice. A journal entry from 1986 (the year of *A Fire in My Belly*'s production) contains the note 'Use modern totemic figures', which the artist lists as being 'Rubber Devil, Robot Dolls, Plastic Indians, Space Toys, Rubber Frankensteins', resembling the contents of his *Magic Box*.¹⁵⁶ This interest in the use of kitsch to act as modern totems offers another level of context to the cheap plastic crucifix featured in the film, and suggests its place within the constellation of the 'pre-invented world' rather than its less historically secure framing as a weapon of specifically AIDS-related political critique.

¹⁵⁴ David Wojnarowicz's 'Magic Box', undated, Series XIII: Objects and Artifacts, Subseries B: The "Magic Box", Folder 092.2.0543, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

¹⁵⁵ Tom Rauffenbart, cited in 'Scope and Contents Note', Series XIII: Objects and Artifacts, Subseries B: The Magic Box, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

¹⁵⁶ Journals 1986-87: Europe and America, Series I: Journals, Box 1, Folder 18, MSS092 David Wojnarowicz Papers ca. 1954-1992, Downtown Collection, Fales Library, New York University, New York.

The Mexican Catholic aesthetic of the film has also rarely been acknowledged or examined in any detail, which is surprising in relation to the film's denunciation by a Catholic organisation in 2010. This is crucial to any understanding of the crucifix image, as representations of Mexico's engagement with Catholicism frequently include aesthetic (and, in some cases, theological) influences from Mesoamerican, Yorùbá and/or Santería religious practices, with images like the Virgin of Guadalupe existing as 'a syncretistic blending of Spanish colonial Catholicism and precolonial Aztec culture'.¹⁵⁷ Christian imagery in Mexico is often used in conjunction with animal images, mementoes of the dead or dying and adaptations of pre-Christian beliefs, in shrines, rituals and most famously the 'Día de los Muertos' celebrations in August.

When seen within the context of Mexican Catholic iconography and its depiction of animals, skulls and representations of earth and the corporeal, the crucifix image appears much less incongruous and explicit. Wojnarowicz's six-minute edit in fact includes images of Día de los Muertos figurines and Aztec iconography, and the image of ants on a crucifix appears less anomalous and confrontational when seen alongside these other images. Within both of Wojnarowicz's edits the crucifix is preceded and followed by images which offer similar instances of blurring between the Christian and the pre-colonial state of the country – whether the natural world (ants, earth, flowers floating on a river) or pre-Christian religious practices and

¹⁵⁷ Antonio D. Sison, 'Postcolonial Religious Syncretism: Focus on the Philippines, Peru, and Mexico', *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. by John Lyden (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 178-193 (p. 188).

rituals (Mesoamerican shrines, mummified corpses, the ritual washing of graves and the Dia de los Muertes).

The Mexican location of the film, and the influences of the country on the aesthetic and artistic strategies of the artist, have been overlooked by the coverage of the scandal – an effect exacerbated by these motifs having been largely excised from the Smithsonian edit. It is nevertheless a key aspect of its production, and offers a particular reading absent from the existing writing devoted to it. The connection between Wojnarowicz and Mexico, a country looked to by Wojnarowicz (perhaps problematically) as less governed by the ‘pre-invented world’, affords a different perspective on the image of ants crawling over a crucifix. Rather than viewing the image solely as the expression of an urban, politically motivated artist with a specific political objective in mind, it can instead be viewed as a deliberate and historically grounded expression of a social concept (the pre-invented world) through the lens of nature and the Mexican context of its production. This distinction calls back to Lippard’s suggestion of the difference between broadly ‘political’ artwork and that pursuing a specifically ‘activist’ goal.

A Fire in My Belly in the Cinema of Transgression

My reading the film in relation to Wojnarowicz’s broader political critique is complemented below by my account of the film in relation to the post-punk Cinema of Transgression, an approach that has been generally overlooked in the existing critical reflection on Wojnarowicz. As I have already referred to, this movement was

devoted to a deliberately juvenile rejection of the conventional morality of the time, with films designed to offend and confront their audiences with violence, gore, unconventional sex, gender play and the abject. Even a cursory list of film titles demonstrates the filmmaker's cartoonish engagement with the transgressive; *They Eat Scum* (1979); *Geek Maggot Bingo* (1983); *Rat Trap* (1986); *Submit to Me* (1985); *Whoregasm* (1988) and *Nazi* (1991).

The Cinema of Transgression emphatically does not fit within narratives of worthy activism, of justified resistance to direct oppression, or to the formation of community in adversity. Its directors, which included Richard Kern, Tommy Turner, and Nick Zedd, as noted above, as well as Tessa Hughes-Freeland, Casandra Stark and Manuel Delanda, produced 'visceral and compulsive films which celebrated the dangerous borderland of grotesque comedy, sexual liberation and vertiginous horror' at their best, and 'incompetent adolescent pretension' at their worst, according to Duncan Reekie.¹⁵⁸ Having said that, there are interesting questions to be drawn out of an analysis of the film in relation to the loose conglomerate of creators of frequently vicious, graphic and subversive underground cinema. As Sargeant writes, the 'Cinema of Transgression was about negated borders and the breaking of boundaries [...] to perform revolutionary acts which would cross all socially constructed and socially accepted boundaries', a project that clearly echoes aspects of Wojnarowicz's attempted outlining and pushing at the borders of the pre-invented world.¹⁵⁹ The Cinema of Transgression is also another example of the

¹⁵⁸ Duncan Reekie, *Subversion: The Definitive History of Underground Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), p. 190.

¹⁵⁹ Sargeant, *Deathtripping*, p. 33

importance of post-punk as a generative context for Wojnarowicz practice. As Reekie observes the film movement developed ‘across the axis of film and performance’, as Wojnarowicz’s practice did, and provided a ‘dynamic visual correlative to punk rock music’.¹⁶⁰

A Fire in My Belly was produced at the same moment of many of the Cinema of Transgression’s most significant films. It was being worked on during the same period (1986/early 1987) that saw the production and first screenings of Richard Kern’s *Fingered* (1986), *Submit to Me Now* (1987) and his *Death Valley ‘69* video for Sonic Youth (1986), Nick Zedd’s *Police State* (1987) and Turner’s *Rat Trap*. It was also produced shortly after Wojnarowicz’s similarly unfinished collaboration with Turner *Where Evil Dwells* (1985) and his performances in Kern’s films *Manhattan Love Suicides* (1985) and *You Killed Me First* (1985). It seems reasonable to assume that his personal and artistic association with the Cinema of Transgression filmmakers (which was at its closest at this time) would have had a profound influence on the production of *A Fire in My Belly*. This is all the more emphasised by the presence of Turner on the trip to Mexico, where much of *A Fire in My Belly* was filmed, and whose attempted detox from heroin addiction whilst away would inspire the painting *Tommy’s Illness/Mexico City*.

Whilst a synopsis of each of the films referred to above would be exceedingly long, due to the density of imagery contained within them, it is useful to state some

¹⁶⁰ Reekie, p. 188.

recurring themes and tropes from the movement in order to properly convey the nature of their transgressive aesthetic. Sex, violence and bodily fluids appear regularly, often within the same frame and gleefully intermingling. Whilst these images are often graphic, perhaps the most transgressive aspect of the films to modern sensibilities are the sexual politics, power relations and fixation on the most extreme aspects of each image. Rather than the simply explicit depiction of sexuality, as I discussed in Chapter One Kern's *Fingered* includes decidedly ambiguous scenes of sex/rape, as does Zedd's later *Whoregasm*, for example. Similarly, violence is gleefully presented through both fictional enactment and reality. Sargeant, for example, describes a scene in Zedd's *War Is Menstrual Envy* (1990-92) as containing 'stock footage of pickled abortions and Agent Orange miscarriages edited with original footage depicting a chemical warfare suited soldier killing a baby'.¹⁶¹ When I describe the aesthetic of the movement as transgressive, therefore, it is not an exaggeration but a recognition of its often morally dubious extremity.

Whilst not featuring narratively-framed depictions of sex and violence, *A Fire in My Belly* is in actual fact extremely similar to several other films from the Cinema of Transgression in both its general aesthetic and construction of images, and its production process and ethos. Although the film foregrounds its geographical placement in Mexico, rather than the predominantly New York context of the Cinema of Transgression, it also features indoor shots which were produced in

¹⁶¹ Jack Sargeant, *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression* (London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1995), p. 53.

Wojnarowicz's apartment when he returned home to the city, shot with 'just a couple of lamps against the wall of my house'.¹⁶² This home production and primitive lighting was also used by the directors of the Cinema of Transgression, and these shots are some of those most evocative of the other films of the movement.

Compare for example the footage of a man dancing and stripping under a strobe in Wojnarowicz's six-minute edit with Kern's *Submit to Me Now*, a film in which various scene figures strip in a similarly framed close up, kiss and grope each other, and are later sprayed with (probably fake) blood. The scenes in both films feature performers stripping or gyrating against a shadowy backdrop in the kind of apartment common to those living on the Lower East Side at that time. An almost identical shot of hands undoing the buttons of a shirt also appears in both films. The striptease is sexual, but disrupted by the proximity of the camera, and by the lighting and editing (it is frequently difficult to see what it is happening). *A Fire in My Belly*'s strobe effect acts in a similar way to the camera's gyroscopic spinning in *Submit to Me Now*, the motion and/or strobing reacting with the low visual fidelity of the Super-8 film to render the body an abstract blur. In contrast to a striptease in conventional pornography, little flesh is shown, with the editing in both *Submit to Me Now* and *A Fire in My Belly* frustrating the ability of the audience to see the presumed exposure of the body through jittery footage, jumps forward from one moment to the next, and, in the six-minute edit of *A Fire in My Belly*, ironic cutaways

¹⁶² David Wojnarowicz, cited by Jeri Cain Rossi in 'David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992)' in Sargeant, *Deathtripping*, p. 139.

to sides of hanging beef. Stylistically then, *A Fire in My Belly* shares much with *Submit to Me Now*, one of the key films of the Cinema of Transgression.

In content too, footage of disabled beggars, bloodied criminals and individual body parts (such as a spinning eyeball) echo some of the same visual fixations as other Cinema of Transgression filmmakers. Wojnarowicz's thirteen-minute cut, in footage almost entirely removed from the Smithsonian edit, also cuts between simulated and real violence (as in Sargeant's description of Zedd's film above), dwelling on images of a cockfight, a bull being killed by matadors and children fighting on the street, interspersed with the pantomime grappling of Luchadores (Mexican Wrestlers). The obviously mimed fight of the wrestlers is positioned uncomfortably alongside real dying animals and injured people, fake blood and gore blurring into real. This queasy juxtaposition of the two is characteristic of many films of the Cinema of Transgression. *A Fire in My Belly* therefore echoes the other work being made by the filmmakers of the movement in both form and content. The movement is not a context for the film that has been explored in detail, however, either in the limited critical material devoted to the Cinema of Transgression, or later reflection on *A Fire in My Belly*.

Whilst Wojnarowicz is mentioned in much of the limited critical material devoted to The Cinema of Transgression, it is predominantly as a friend of the directors and as a collaborator with Turner and Kern. His acknowledgement as a filmmaker himself is largely positioned as peripheral to the work of the 'main' directors of the movement (Kern, Zedd, Turner and Hughes-Freeland) in the two primary publications

examining the movement. Both of these publications, Jack Sargeant's *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression* from 1995, and the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition *You Killed Me First: The Cinema of Transgression* at Berlin's KW Institute, largely discuss Wojnarowicz's role as an actor in *You Killed Me First* and co-director of *Where Evil Dwells* with Turner, rather than any of his own works.

The six-minute edit of *Fire in My Belly* was included in the *You Killed Me First* exhibition, however, and the page devoted to it in the accompanying catalogue is one of the few examples of reflection on the film that does not reference AIDS as central to its concerns. Here the main themes of the film are listed as

Catholic concepts of martyrdom, sublimation, trans-substantiation and sin [that] are reinterpreted. Images of destruction, violence and decay in nature and culture interweave and produce a kaleidoscope of deep and utter pain.¹⁶³

This might appear to then be exactly the kind of reading I argue is missing from the Smithsonian scandal. However, due to the brevity of this analysis and the catalogue's limited distribution, this description will perhaps have little impact on wider narratives around the work, and, even within the same catalogue Wojnarowicz's wider relation to the movement is minimised. In the previously referenced short essay included in the catalogue, Lotringer rows his association with

¹⁶³ 'A Fire in My Belly Excerpt (1986/87)', in *You Killed Me First: The Cinema of Transgression*, pp. 128-23 (p. 131).

these filmmakers back as a momentary diversion, alluding to greater political ambitions than the other filmmakers, concluding that 'it is fitting that David Wojnarowicz would have remained a marginal figure in the Cinema of Transgression'.¹⁶⁴ Lotringer writes that Wojnarowicz was 'more an artist than a filmmaker', a statement that is intended no doubt as a compliment but also suggests an unease at Wojnarowicz being positioned and examined as an artist of the movement.

I suggest that this may reflect a tacit instance of 'containment', a term I borrow from the cultural materialist analysis of Jonathan Dollimore. In his analysis, containment is understood as relating to the incorporation of transgressive material into the dominant culture - summarised usefully when he writes that 'dominant social forms can and do reconstitute themselves around the self-same contradictions that destabilise them'.¹⁶⁵ Dollimore's definition of the 'dominant culture' calls back to the work of the CCCS, as discussed in my introduction, referring to the bourgeois structures of cultural hegemony that reinforce capitalist power relations. Broadly, I contend that the lack of acknowledgement of the Cinema of Transgression as a context for the film reflects an attempt to sustain a particular type of cultural legitimacy.

That is, the often-questionable content of films by Turner, Zedd and other filmmakers of the Cinema of Transgression may contribute towards the implicit

¹⁶⁴ Lotringer, 'Rushes From Death', p. 158

¹⁶⁵ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 89.

need to quarantine Wojnarowicz's legacy from its corrupting influence. Dollimore writes that the 'humanist' scholar is 'less concerned to release the text from its historical context than to reconcile it with the most humane values discernible in that context and in the critic's own'.¹⁶⁶ This might represent a problematically 'humanist' approach that seeks tacitly to justify the politically uncomfortable content of *A Fire in My Belly*, through a broader desire to recoup Wojnarowicz's practice as typified by a more laudable political goal or ideal, represented by AIDS activism. Critics invested in the figure of Wojnarowicz as the totemic political artist of the AIDS crisis (DeLand's 'useful corpse') are uninterested in the examination of *A Fire in My Belly* in relation to the Cinema of Transgression as it is a largely apolitical, even politically regressive and in some cases morally dubious scene that fits uneasily within liberal humanist agendas.

What this does not acknowledge is that, as Dollimore writes, '[s]ome artists, like certain intellectuals, seek out and embrace dangerous knowledge which potentially conflicts not just with reactionary social agendas but progressive, humane and responsible agendas as well'.¹⁶⁷ This raises a point of connection between subcultural investment (dangerous or oppositional knowledges and lifestyles) and artistic practices. He goes on to state that

if we approach literature [or art] insisting on an alignment of the ethical conscience and the creative imagination we blind ourselves to the fact that

¹⁶⁶ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity Press/Blackwell, 2001), p. 109.

¹⁶⁷ Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, p. 97.

some of the most compelling writing [or artworks] are about the tension between, if not the incompatibility, of, these two things.¹⁶⁸

The political characterisation of Wojnarowicz, his status as a social critic and vital figure in the artistic response to the AIDS crisis discourages the comparison of Wojnarowicz to an artist like Kern, who has now come to be known as ‘a modern day patron saint of boobs, pretty girls, good bands, and babes having a great time’.¹⁶⁹ Kern’s pornography, association with *Vice* (as detailed in the opening to this chapter) and the unapologetically neurotic heterosexual voyeurism of his films and photography is difficult to reconcile with Wojnarowicz’s status as a crusader for progressive sexual and artistic freedom. To some extent Lotringer tries to excuse Wojnarowicz from this juvenile and perhaps ethically dubious flirting with forbidden or taboo imagery undertaken by Kern and others through the argument that his inspiration was more ‘poetic and cosmic than cartoonish’, perhaps itself an example of what Dollimore suggests is a ‘humane’ agenda on the part of scholars.¹⁷⁰

Although I locate an aspect of this humane agenda in Lotringer’s essay, I finish my discussion of Wojnarowicz by acknowledging that it does also usefully point to a way of better addressing Wojnarowicz’s participation in the movement. Lotringer suggests that the Cinema of Transgression is a movement that, in prefiguring and providing a context for the development of Wojnarowicz’s practice, eventually

¹⁶⁸ Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, p. 163.

¹⁶⁹ Wendy Syfret, ‘Trying to Talk to Richard Kern About Something Other Than Sex’, *Vice*, <<http://www.vice.com/read/trying-to-talk-to-richard-kern-about-something-other-than-sex>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para 1 of 51).

¹⁷⁰ Lotringer, ‘Rushes from Death’, p. 155.

allowed him to develop the kind of artistic strategies later deployed with great effect as a political response to the injustices of the AIDS crisis. He does not, like Sandler and Owens, suggest that Wojnarowicz's pre-AIDS crisis work was puerile, but that it maintained a different kind of political acuteness. In this argument Lotringer's project and my own are more aligned. Lotringer compares Wojnarowicz's participation in the Cinema of Transgression movement to that of Antonin Artaud's in the Surrealist group, as someone who 'didn't quite belong' but for whom being with them 'gave him enough confidence to turn his madness into a stunning cultural statement'.¹⁷¹ This relation to Artaud and the French writer and performer's participation in the surrealist group between 1924 and 1926 is interesting, as both Wojnarowicz and Artaud maintain a polymathic artistic project, unconstrained by limits of artistic form and produced by investment in several mediums.

To return to the concept of the polymath, the idea of varied and diverse influences contributing towards a unified practice is one that is as applicable to Wojnarowicz as it is to Artaud. As Edward Scheer writes, to refer to Artaud as only a 'prominent screen actor, writer and artist would be insufficient and would require re-imagining those professions in the light of his immense, sometimes amorphous and often perverse, output'.¹⁷² Lotringer's essay identifies the potential of considering Wojnarowicz's practice as being enriched and shaped by his participation in the

¹⁷¹ Lotringer, 'Rushes from Death', p. 156. Artaud (1896-1948) was a French writer, actor and theatre director whose artistic practice and framing of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' in his writing was highly influential in the development of twentieth century experimental performance.

¹⁷² Edward Scheer, 'On Antonin Artaud: A Beginners Guide to Cruelty', in *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Edward Scheer (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

Cinema of Transgression, as Artaud's was by his association with the Surrealists. As I argue in relation to Wojnarowicz's participation in the post-punk music scene above, the ethos of transgression within the Cinema of Transgression contributed to Wojnarowicz's development of his artistic strategies and aesthetics. Post-punk movements both prefigure and generate the artistic parameters within which Wojnarowicz would later respond to the AIDS crisis.

An understanding of Wojnarowicz's participation in the Cinema of Transgression then might allow a greater sense of the connections between subcultural moments (such as post-punk in New York and ACT UP's formation of political communities and assertion of identity). It also offers a new perspective on *A Fire in My Belly*, a now notorious piece of contemporary art, and affirms the Lower East Side as an environment that, in the words of Carlo McCormick, created 'an ongoing dialogue in which different disciplines could inspire, inform and enrich one another', leaving a 'legacy of migratory practices where virtuosity was far less paramount than the capacity to embrace the fullest possible array of expressions'.¹⁷³ Wojnarowicz's importance as a voice of resistance against the criminal negligence of public officials during the AIDS crisis must of course be sustained, but it is important to recognise that in allowing this to overdetermine artworks engaging in other work as well it might be, to return to Dollimore, 'too easy to appropriate the resistance of others for optimistic theoretical narratives of our own while leaving behind the fuller histories that would complicate those narratives'.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Carlo McCormick, 'Reprisal in Rewind', p. 38.

¹⁷⁴ Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 90.

Rather than excusing or explaining away Wojnarowicz's particularly post-punk nature through suggestions that aspects of his practice that did not conform to a politically activist narrative were diversions or temporary anomalies, I have attempted to demonstrate the manner in which it might be important to take these non-conforming aspects of his practice as seriously as his later work. My overarching concern in this research has been to acknowledge the breadth of the post-punk polymath artist seriously, to embrace the diversity and sometimes contradictory motivations of artists and their wider project. By reaffirming post-punk as an important context for Wojnarowicz's work, I have attempted to reflect on the content of the work in relation to its original context, and, as with Lydia Lunch, explore how the artist themselves viewed their project and its strategies. In the case of Wojnarowicz, a return to post-punk as a formative context provides insight into the development of the content of his work and the development of his attitudes towards criticism and historicisation. As I move on to now discuss the artist Vaginal Davis, I explore the significance of an artist's own rationalisations and articulations of their practice further, and the responsibilities of scholars to address them, despite the methodological challenges of doing so.

Chapter Three – Vaginal Davis: Self-Sabotage and Subjectivity

In a wobbly and unstable close up, two figures sit on a couch in a Los Angeles apartment shouting and laughing at each other, remarking on the pornographic film that has supposedly just started on the out-of-shot television. The two performers regularly corpse in their delivery of what appears to be very loosely scripted dialogue: 'Fertile, you are always pregnant, what is the story with you, girl?'.¹ The two performers, Vaginal 'Crème' Davis and Fertile La Toyah Jackson, are identified by the title cards that break up the footage of their rambling and only intermittently audible conversation. The pair wear thick make-up and wigs, and speak in voices that appear to be artificially higher than their usual speaking tone (somewhere between falsetto and a sultry impression of a Hollywood starlet).

They are in drag, but it is a smudged, flamboyant and haphazard drag, made up of casual, everyday clothes and cheap props. It is a drag far removed from either an attempt to accurately impersonate a woman, or the conventional modes of drag performance described by the critical material devoted to that practice. They certainly do not conform to the 'real disguise and false disguise' dichotomy outlined by Roger Baker, where false disguise relates to a performer's explicit foregrounding of his disguised maleness and 'real disguise' signifies that not being a woman is 'irrelevant to the nature of the drama being played out'.² Neither does it seem to fit

¹ Vaginal Davis, in *That Fertile Feeling*, dir. Keith Holland and John O'Shea, 1986

² Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (London: Cassell, 1994), pp. 14-15. Baker uses these two terms as a dividing line between different kinds of performance in drag throughout his book.

the 'glamour' or 'clown' archetypes described by Julian Fleisher, 'glamour' corresponding to the believability or 'realness' of the drag, and 'clown', corresponding to parodic exaggeration and acerbic humour.³ Fertile then exclaims 'Vaginal, my water just broke!', kicking off a hysterical panic to find her suitcase and car keys.

The action shifts to outside the apartment, showing the performers getting into a car on a Hollywood street. A series of poorly edited shots and out-of-sync dialogue imply they are hurriedly driving to a hospital, when it is apparent that they are actually driving slowly around in circles. Finding the 'hospital' (which appears to be a boarded-up health clinic) closed, they knock on the door of the apartment belonging to 'Nude Husband' (Johnny Dark), to have the baby. As Fertile goes in to labour on the carpet, Davis delivers 'eleventuplets' under a towel in a pantomime fashion, without removing Fertile's trousers. Minutes after the birth, Fertile leaves the apartment on a skateboard, pulling tricks in the car park as Davis harangues her from the window to come back and look after the children.

This is *That Fertile Feeling* (1992), an eight-minute short film produced by the artist Vaginal Davis. It offers a useful introduction to the artist's practice, featuring as it does many of the characteristics that mark her polymathic artistic production: DIY aesthetics, the blurring and unsettling of gender, humour, narrative leaps and confusion, amateurism and the use of an unconventional means of dissemination.

³ See Julian Fleisher, *The Drag Queens of New York: An Illustrated Field Guide to Drag* (New York: Riverside Books, 1996).

Davis was a central figure in the fanzine (or 'zine') culture of the 1980s and early 90s, and the film was distributed primarily through that network rather than galleries, cinemas, film festivals or other more formal methods. This zine culture was an international community of artists and writers who self-produced magazines and other material, primarily to document and share material from various subcultures, such as punk and post-punk scenes, sexual cultures and political movements. Material like *That Fertile Feeling* was sold through mail order, and then further passed on through increasingly degraded reproductions that circulated amongst friendship groups and aficionados of underground film.

Probably Davis's most famous output is *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Video Magazine*, a compilation VHS containing short films (like *That Fertile Feeling*), music videos and comic reportage from her life in Los Angeles that developed a cult following through this same process of dissemination.⁴ Davis produced the influential *Fertile La Toyah Jackson* in both a video edition and as a printed (Xeroxed) magazine, sold through the mail and at zine fairs, along with other publications such as *Crude*, *Shrimp* and *Yes, Ms. Davis*. Davis has continued to produce zines, and to direct and star in independent films and theatrical productions since the early 1980s (both her own and in collaboration with other artists). Writing in 2015, Grace Dunham references the fact that currently the 'most comprehensive archive of the artist [...] is on

⁴ Throughout this thesis I use the pronouns 'her' and 'she' to refer to Davis. Davis is referred to as 'he' in several articles and interviews, but those with a close association to her and her work (such as Bruce LaBruce and Ron Athey) predominantly use female pronouns. The use of 'she' is an idiom of both mainstream drag and several of the queer subcultures Davis is invested in. Davis has also claimed an intersex gender identity in some interviews, although not consistently. See Hili Perlson, 'Vaginal Davis Speaks', *Sleek*, 30 September 2011, <<http://www.sleek-mag.com/berlin/2011/09/vaginal-davis-interview/>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

YouTube, where fans have uploaded hundreds of clips of her videos and performances', something of a modern digital equivalent of the zine-network swapping of material amongst fans. Indeed, this is the easiest place to see a (noticeably degraded) version of *That Fertile Feeling* today.⁵

Alongside her practice as a maker and distributor of zines, Davis concurrently developed a fearsome reputation and cult following on the alternative music scene of the 1980s and early 1990s as lead singer in her conceptual 'art band' projects the Afro Sisters, black fag, Pedro, Muriel & Esther (PME) and ¡Cholita! The Female Menudo. Through these projects she was an instigator and prime antagonist of the post-punk sub-genre Queercore (also known as Homocore) most prominently in her native Los Angeles. Davis also ran and hosted several influential performance/club nights in LA throughout the 1990s and early 2000s including Club Sucker (1994-1999), G.I.M.P. (2000-2001) and Bricktops (2002-2005), events that were both examples of her artistic aesthetic and strategies and a venue for other bands and performers, some of whom had or have since achieved a considerable level of commercial success and fame.⁶ Although not consistently self-identifying as a performance artist, her character-driven hosting of events, and her non-musical performances in cabaret and theatrical contexts, such as monologues, audience interaction (physical and verbal) and other performative interventions suggest a strong relation to performance/live art, and most of the critical work devoted to her

⁵ Grace Dunham, 'The Terrorist Drag of Vaginal Davis', *The New Yorker*, 12 December 2015, <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/terrorist-drag-vaginal-davis>> [accessed 4 May 2017] (para. 1 of 11).

⁶ Musical acts who performed at these club nights include Weezer, Foo Fighters, the Hidden Cameras, Xiu Xiu, the Dandy Warhols and others.

practice has emerged out of performance studies. Davis thus occupies a unique position between the intertwining histories of film, performance, live art and punk and queer subcultures.

In Chapter One I examined the manner in which punk subcultures provide the conditions for a polymathic mode of artistic production through my analysis of Lydia Lunch and associated figures on New York's Lower East Side, as well as how such work functions intertextually. An illustration of the potential of resituating the subculture as central to the work of David Wojnarowicz, alongside the potentially problematic oversight of alternative contexts to his work was then explored in Chapter Two. In my consideration of Davis, I now move on to consider in more detail the relationship of artists themselves to their marginality and critical position. In the case of Davis, this relationship is one of indifference to the analysis of her work, and in some situations, involves the explicit undermining of critical reflection by others. Davis's practice is one that allows useful reflection on the role post-punk polymath artists themselves play in the creation, securing and sustaining of critical marginality.

If, as Chapter One suggests, the full scope of the work of post-punk polymaths is left isolated from critical apparatus due to the context and intertextual manner in which they make their work, then to what extent do subculturally invested polymath artists also reinforce this or deliberately complicate critical reflection on their practice, and with what effects? Whilst I have already engaged with this topic in relation to both Lunch and Wojnarowicz's continual statements against their incorporation into institutional or critical frameworks, Davis's practice allows me to

explore this concept further. I deploy Davis's work within a framework of 'self-sabotage', by staging it as an instinct derived from subcultural investment that subverts the ability and desire of academics and other critical writers to reflect on her practice. This analysis of Davis's work also marks a shift in my thesis away from New York to Los Angeles, and to the distinct subcultural legacy of that city. This is useful as the existence and analysis of polymathic artists (such as Davis) in an environment other than New York serves to reiterate my assertion that post-punk as a wider cultural trend has a particular set of subcultural characteristics that encourages interdisciplinary, multi-medium artistic production, and that post-punk polymathy is not simply the result of the unique municipal situation in New York during the 1970s and 80s, but a trend present in other post-punk scenes, and sustained in other contexts.

After leaving Los Angeles for Berlin in 2006, Davis has continued to produce work as a visual artist, sculptor and writer, and as a musician with her most recent bands Tenderloin and Ruth Fischer. She also continues her work with various long-term collaborators, such as the photographer Rick Castro, filmmaker and writer Bruce LaBruce (who is, alongside artist G.B. Jones, another key figure in the development of Queercore), and fashion designer Rick Owens. These associations provide occasional intersections with the worlds of haute couture and popular fashion, with Davis appearing in magazines such as *Dazed and Confused* and *Document Journal* as an idiosyncratic style icon. Davis's online gossip blog and social diary *Speaking from the Diaphragm* reportedly has (according to the artist) a quarter of a million regular

readers.⁷ Throughout each of these diverse strands of her artistic practice, Davis produces work that blends a peculiarly Angeleno understanding of celebrity, glamour and showbiz with the cultural politics of race, gender, sexuality, privilege and class. This work crosses institutional and genre boundaries, and operates within an ethos of do-it-yourself that stretches back to the earliest days of Californian punk.

Alice Bag, an LA punk performer and later bandmate of Davis, remembers that the LA punk scene was ‘unconsciously egalitarian. The bands, musicians, artists, press and everyone involved in the punk scene provided an adequate sampling of L.A.’s misfit population’, the expansive geography of LA engendering a scene that was less centralised and more racially diverse than the Lower East Side.⁸ Although I am specifically interested in post-punk in this thesis, what is referred to by participants as ‘LA punk’ actually occurred later than and shared more characteristics with the post-punk scenes I have been discussing than the 1976-77 first wave of punk in New York and London. Thus, whilst I use the term LA punk in this chapter, I consider it to be a post-punk scene, in the sense of responding to the first wave of punk with a drive toward innovation and a blurring of art forms. Davis also suggests that the scene was ‘very art-motivated, because a lot of people had gone to art school, as well as being ‘very queer-dominated, and very female-dominated and female-

⁷ The exact truth of this is hard to judge. A significant characteristic of Davis’s persona is her fictionalisation of her own popularity, fame and/or personal history, as discussed further below.

⁸ Alice Bag, *Violence Girl: East L.A. Rage to Hollywood Stage, A Chicana Punk Story* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2011), p. 195. Bag was also the eponymous lead singer of The Bags, an LA punk band still somewhat unusual at the time for being fronted by a Mexican-American woman.

driven', before the shift towards the more aggressively heterosexual hardcore scene in the 1980s.⁹ This LA punk scene is the subcultural environment in which Davis developed her practice, and I argue its strategies and attitudes frame her subsequent work.

As Suzanne Lacy and Jennifer Flores-Sternad observe, 'artists who performed at LA punk rock venues entered a world where codes of spectatorship were radically different from those of art or theatre', a situation which offered those artists an opportunity to perform in 'a way that was not precious, rehearsed or perhaps even recognisable as either art or music', much like those on the Lower East Side at the same time.¹⁰ This description of the influence LA punk clubs and social structures had on the work of artists performing in them is particularly relevant to Davis, who is briefly referenced by Lacy and Flores-Sternad as beginning her artistic career in that context, amongst other acts like Ron Athey, Phranc and performance ensemble Fat & Fucked Up.¹¹ Davis's description of her own performance events and artistic projects is, as described, never 'precious' and frequently involves a dismissal of her own legibility in terms of artistic disciplines and histories, and certainly of her practice as being fully either 'art or music'.

⁹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014. I discuss the shift from LA punk to hardcore further below.

¹⁰ Suzanne Lacy and Jennifer Flores-Sternad, 'Voices, Variations and Deviations', in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California 1970-1983*, ed. by Peggy Phelan (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 61-114 (pp. 97-98).

¹¹ Lacey and Flores-Sternad reference Anti-Club, Brave Dog, Al's Bar, The Masque and the Hong Kong Café as some of the venues where this punk/art crossover occurred.

Even the framing of her artistic activities as a ‘practice’ at all is met with some resistance; Davis tells me that ‘I always like to shy away from those kinds of academic terms people use, like art practice and “my work”, blah, blah, blah...’.¹²

Davis resists, perhaps unconsciously as well as consciously, academic or overtly theoretical analysis of her performances and visual art, and the canonisation or institutionalisation that such an analysis might bring. Her statement suggests she is ambivalent about it even being afforded the status of an art practice at all. Davis actively performs her disinclination or indifference towards discussion by critical writers, whether historians of performance and visual cultures or cultural journalists. My analysis here examines why and how post-punk polymaths might maintain an ambivalent or actively resistant stance, and goes on to ask why critical writers might then choose to reflect on artists who profess not to care that they are ignored by the academy and other institutions. As I explore below, this tension speaks to recurring themes within my thesis about the institutionalisation or accommodation of subcultural practices by academics, but also of marketisation and careerism (or anti-careerism) in art practices across disciplines. Davis is my primary example of a prolific and influential artist who appears to continually work against her own incorporation into critical models of reflection, and to subvert her opportunities of entry into critical discourses, as well as the market and other art world structures.

¹² Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

My personal relationship with Davis began in 2011, when I worked as her assistant during a workshop project in London.¹³ Since that time we have maintained a friendship and written correspondence. My analysis will therefore draw on personal conversations with Davis, my experience as an audience member at several of her live performances, a private archive of correspondence with the artist from 2011 to the present, and a comprehensive interview undertaken in 2014 at the artist's home in Berlin, as well as the limited critical material that has already been published about her work.¹⁴ Davis's juxtaposition of camp and trash aesthetics with cloaked social critique began to be acknowledged by the academy in the 1990s, primarily by performance scholars and most notably through the work of the late José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour* (1999). In 2006, Jennifer Doyle's *Sex Objects* then became the second major scholarly publication to reflect on Davis's practice in detail. Davis is occasionally referred to briefly in subsequent articles and essays on queer performance, queer cinemas and zine culture, but these references are most commonly cited from either Muñoz or Doyle's earlier work.

Davis was personally close to Muñoz before his death in 2013, and Doyle also writes from a position of friendship with the artist. Other journal articles that examine Davis's practice in greater detail or as a primary object of study are overwhelmingly written by Marc Siegel (her collaborator in Berlin-based theatre company collective

¹³ This workshop project, 'Framing the Freakazoid' took place as part of *Performance Matters* (discussed further below) at Toynbee Studios in London, 31 October – 2 November 2011.

¹⁴ Our interview took place on 3 December 2014 at Davis's home in Schöneberg, Berlin. An edited version was also published in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* as 'My Womanly Story: Lewis Church in Conversation with Vaginal Davis', *PAJ*, 38 (2016), 80–88.

CHEAP), or other direct collaborators.¹⁵ Friendship and personal connection to those who write about Davis's work, as well as her other fans, is therefore a recognisable factor in much of the existing critical material devoted to her practice. Davis's press attention in art periodicals, international newspapers and magazines is sporadic, although in the last three to four years the breadth of coverage by arts and culture publications has increased. This follows her visual art exhibition at New York's Participant Inc. gallery in late 2011, after which short articles appeared in publications like *The New Yorker* and *Art in America*.¹⁶ The reputable gallery context of the established Participant Inc. appears to have provoked much of this interest, and there is still a noticeable prevalence of current and ex-collaborators in the authorship of this coverage.

Although there may be a perceived tension between critical objectivity and personal investment in the work of an artist, the nature of Davis's practice is such that personal networks (punk and queer subcultures broadly, but also personal friendships and individual fandom) are intrinsically related to its success and dissemination, and to understanding its strategies and aesthetic. Both Muñoz and Doyle articulate their engagement with Davis through writings that reflect their friendship with the artist and direct experience as audience members and fans. My own experiences as Davis's correspondent and friend similarly shape my more formal critical reflection on her work. I write from the position of a fan of her work,

¹⁵ A fuller examination of this critical material is included in my later analysis.

¹⁶ Ryan Donnelly, 'The Teachings of Vaginal Davis', *Art in America*, 26 November 2012, <<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/vaginal-davis-participant-inc/>> [accessed 4 May 2017]. See footnote 5 for Dunham's *New Yorker* article above.

and as a believer in its efficacy as an artistic practice with powerful iconoclastic potential, but also as a scholar aware of the difficulties and requirements of academic reflection, and of the impulse to push or wish to celebrate an artist's work in that context. The ethics of friendship with one's subject, and the corresponding potential of less objective but perhaps deeper engagement with their work is discussed in detail below as one of the main topics in this chapter.

Memory Island and Self-Sabotage

Davis's performance of *Memory Island* in the Tate Modern's Starr Auditorium on 29 October 2011, for which I was in the audience, provides a useful case study for what I term her recurring process of 'self-sabotage'. Davis had come to London after being invited to perform at Tate Modern as part of the *Performance Matters* creative research project, a five-year program exploring the cultural value of performance, organised by the Live Art Development Agency in collaboration with Adrian Heathfield and Gavin Butt (then academics at Roehampton and Goldsmiths Universities respectively) from 2009 to 2014. The research project aimed to explore 'the challenges that contemporary performance presents to ideas of cultural value'.¹⁷ Divided into three themed years of public activity (2009-2012), Davis's performance fell under the second stage of the research project, dubbed 'Trashing

¹⁷ 'Trashing Performance', *Performance Matters*, <<http://www.thisisperformancematters.co.uk/trashing-performance/home.html>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para. 6 of 10).

Performance'. This consisted of a season of events and performances by 'irreverent artists, activists and thinkers working at the edges of taste and respectability'.¹⁸

Trashing Performance featured artists who more usually perform in club contexts, underground spaces and otherwise outside of conventional theatrical institutions. In doing so it aimed to explore of 'the power of creative expressions that wilfully debunk or ignore cultural ideals and hierarchies of critical value', by transplanting those artists into eminent institutions like Tate Modern.¹⁹ The program included artists based in the UK, such as David Hoyle, The Disabled Avant Garde, Bird La Bird and Scottee, and international artists like Davis, Rocío Boliver, Bruce Benderson and others. This was designed to highlight the significance of artists that have facilitated 'the cross-fertilisation of ideas between different contexts and disciplines', yet often do not 'have the required cultural capital to function on the art scene'.²⁰ Davis might appear then to be an ideal artist to be chosen to perform as part of this program, with her influence as a post-punk provocateur of zine-making, conceptual 'art bands', a DIY aesthetic in performance and anarchic gender play being directly relevant to this aim. Eagerly anticipated, sold out and well publicised, Davis's performance of *Memory Island* for Trashing Performance was long, boring, and disrupted by technical limitations.

¹⁸ 'Trashing Performance' (para. 1 of 10).

¹⁹ Live Art Development Agency, 'Trashing Performance', <<http://www.thisliveart.co.uk/projects/trashing-performance>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para. 3 of 8).

²⁰ Gavin Butt, in Gavin Butt, Adrian Heathfield and Lois Keidan, 'Performance Matters: Gavin Butt, Lois Keidan and Adrian Heathfield in Conversation', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24.1 (2014), 102-114 (pp. 104-105).

The evening began with *Granpa Sam* (2001), a short film in which Davis narrates gossipy captions for photographs of Hollywood stars of the 1970s, taken by the grandmother of her collaborator Marc Siegel. After the film, which the audience laughed at and seemed to enjoy, there followed twelve minutes of no stage activity in which the audience sat in the dark. *Memory Island* itself followed, beginning with seven minutes of unaccompanied projection, showing the sea lapping at a tropical beach intercut with shots of various partially clothed and glittered young men. Davis then slowly entered and took to the stage, wearing an enveloping white lace gown and veil, to deliver a short text and vocal improvisation featuring excerpts of songs from the 1941 MGM musical *Ziegfeld Girl*, before sitting on the front of the stage for the remainder of the performance. Though there was a brief round of applause, the audience were muttering and abrupt in their exit, and, from my own observations afterwards, generally disappointed with what had been shown.

Ben Walters' subsequent audio review for *Time Out London* describes the performance as 'disappointing', with it leaving some members of the audience 'slightly perplexed' and irritated by the £10 price of the ticket.²¹ Walters, whom Davis worked with as a contributor to Walters and Gavin Butt's documentary *This Is Not A Dream* (2013), is perhaps being charitable here in his description of some of the audience as 'slightly perplexed'. As well as a general sense of anti-climax, I personally observed several audience members who appeared angry with the shortness and perceived lack of content in the performance. Ultimately, the

²¹ Ben Walters, Audio Review for *Time Out London*, Cabaret, 2011, <<https://soundcloud.com/time-out-london/ben-walters-on-vaginal-daviss>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

performance did not seem to fulfil the expectations of an audience keen for a live encounter with a seminal figure in the development of post-punk music and performance. However, in aesthetic, tone and execution, *Memory Island* was entirely in keeping with Davis's history as an artist and subcultural figure, and with *Performance Matters'* stated curatorial aims of highlighting such practices. Its 'failure' as a performance on this occasion relates to what I describe as the tactics of self-sabotage, a strategic subversion of institutional significance and a conventionally constituted and progressing artistic 'career', that I identify as characteristic of Davis's relationship to her polymathic artistic practice.

My term is related to Daniel S. Traber's conception of LA punk (Davis's formative artistic environment) as being 'self-marginalising'. Traber writes that a 'tactic of self-marginalisation to articulate a politics of dissent is central to the Los Angeles punk scene from (roughly) 1977 to 1983', a time period that was also the point at which Davis was directly involved with the scene.²² Borrowing heavily from Dick Hebdige's articulation of punk participant's self-definition against 'the taken-for-granted landscape of normalised forms' in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Traber points out the way in which LA punk fans and artists inhabited spaces he dubs 'sub-urban' (as opposed to suburban).²³ Traber therefore suggests that members of the scene occupied run-down housing in immigrant communities as a marker of

²² Daniel S. Traber 'L.A.'s White Minority: Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization', *Punkademics: The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2012), pp. 157-178 (p. 158).

²³ Traber, p. 158.

subcultural authenticity, for example. Davis also lived and participated in the 'sub-urban' environments of punks and associated communities that Traber references.

It is important to acknowledge however that Davis will have had a different relationship to the 'sub-urban' spaces that Traber refers to as a non-white native of Watts (a deprived and predominantly black and Latinx neighbourhood of Los Angeles), which renders the direct application of Traber's 'self-marginalisation' to Davis inappropriate. Traber discusses the physical and intellectual distancing of punks and associated communities from the housing and social structures of a bourgeois white America, a social structure that Davis, as a person of colour from a deprived area of the inner city, would not have had immediate access to in any case. My own conception of 'self-sabotage' differs from Traber's 'self-marginalisation' in being more specifically related to both the critical and commercial position of *artists* and the dissemination of their work, rather than speaking to a general confirmation of a subcultural identity in a societal context. Davis's self-sabotage reflects her continued undermining of what could be seen as the attendant cultural manifestations of the bourgeois lifestyle that was rejected by the LA punks, such as the academy, museums and the art market.

Sabotage is perhaps most commonly understood to refer to a deliberate damaging or destruction of property or the means of production in industry, or warfare. As Geoff Brown writes, this reflects the 'hoary old myth' that sabotage derives from French-speaking workers throwing their clogs (*sabots*) 'into their machines to

damage them’.²⁴ Brown goes on to explain that whilst this may indeed have happened during industrial disputes, the word actually originates in older French phrases such as “travailler comme un sabot” (to work slowly, clumsily, and over-deliberately).²⁵ This suggests a much less specific use of the term, one that can refer to almost any deliberate undoing of the smooth function of a system; to knowingly work (or perform) badly in almost any context. It is in terms of this derivation that Davis enacts self-sabotage.

As in *Memory Island*, Davis will often perform ‘badly’, or rather deliberately present work that does not adhere to the parameters for perceived success in a given context. This is particularly true when that context is one that may confer institutional credibility or suggest a critical endorsement, such as Trashing Performance at the Tate Modern. In doing so Davis is not decisively preventing analysis of her work, flinging her (no doubt impressively heeled) shoes into theoretical machinery, but participating only so far as she desires, and then with no guarantee of fidelity to the ideals of what might be considered an effective or successful performance or presentation in such a context.

For me and her (other) fans, Davis’s inconsistency and unpredictability is part of the attraction, with her applying seemingly random levels of effort and commitment to performances and public appearances irrespective of their perceived significance. A short club show may be lavishly staged and intricately rehearsed, whilst a

²⁴ Geoff Brown, *Sabotage: A Study in Industrial Conflict* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977), p. xii.

²⁵ Brown, p. xii.

performance at a major museum for an audience of curators and academics is ramshackle and underprepared. Davis, indeed, appears to deliberately place less emphasis and importance on performances in large institutions, declaring that she is

not really an institution queen. Because people think that being part of an institution they can change the institution from within. But no, institutions change you, you don't change institutions.²⁶

It is apparent from this statement that Davis views the potential of such institutions to change, innovate or respond to the practices of artists outside their already established remit as being severely limited. This statement also reveals an anxiety about the influence of institutional support on artists themselves, changing the work that they might otherwise make in order to appeal or accommodate the demands of a functioning system of artistic progression, endorsement and institutional confirmation. By performing badly, Davis undermines the likelihood of an offer to later perform again at the same venue, or for an expansion of her already existing audience. The audience at the Tate, made up of scholars, students and the established audience for live art in London, are unlikely to further pursue her work if they consider it to have been simply 'bad'.

In addition to completely ignoring and mischievously subverting expectations and conventions of effort, seriousness and importance, Davis further undoes the

²⁶ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

potential for her work to be critically endorsed or reflected on by a further refusing to corroborate analysis, to provide consistent testimony of her artistic motivations or to agree that what she does is in fact even an artistic practice at all. Davis considers this to be intrinsic to what she does:

One of the elements of me is this kind of homespun, putting on something in the moment thing: even though its staged and its rehearsed, it just feels like I'm getting out there and doing whatever. Or [audiences and observers] not being able to tell what parts are actually rehearsed and what parts are actually doing something. And every time I do something I change it a little bit too.²⁷

As a result of this, Davis often and deliberately creates artistic material that is – according to standard measures of success – bad. That is to say, Davis's performances, films or visual art can frequently be ramshackle, imprecise or anarchic, inappropriately long or short, devoid of or overflowing with content, boring or inappropriately scandalous, contentious, un-archivable and/or ephemeral, too confrontational or not confrontational enough. As she references above, the feeling that she is 'doing whatever', that an artwork has no direction or is wildly off-course, can often be uncomfortably pervasive (particularly in live performance). This was certainly the case with *Memory Island* as presented at Tate Modern.

²⁷ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

In this analysis I am not attempting to recoup the performance of *Memory Island* as being 'not bad', either through a camp reconstruction as something 'so bad its good', or as a misunderstood work ahead of its time or beyond the audience.²⁸ The performance was a failure, and was bad, and acknowledged as such by Davis herself in a telephone conversation the following morning, when she synthesised the performance with the exclamation 'Oh, it was *awful*'.²⁹ Instead I propose that rather than an *anomalous* bad show, *Memory Island* represents a clear example of self-sabotage, and in doing so brings forward interesting questions about the context of wilfully marginal artists, and of the hunger of audiences for particular kinds of subcultural expression. Davis's self-sabotage in this instance may not have been entirely deliberate, but is an at least semi-conscious manifestation of her subcultural resistance to 'success', akin to both Lunch and Wojnarowicz's abandonment of successful projects and contexts.

Davis, Failure and the Organic Intellectual

In relation to self-sabotage, the positioning of *Memory Island* at the Tate as a failure is interesting. As Davis herself remarks 'that's the great thing about failures, and that's what makes failures interesting, and that's why I kind of like failures more than I like successes. Because you learn from them so much'.³⁰ Reading *Memory Island* against some of the debate outlined in Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of*

²⁸ See my below discussion of camp in relation to Davis's work for the relevance of this construction.

²⁹ Vaginal Davis, telephone conversation with the author, London, 30 October 2011.

³⁰ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

Failure is useful, as Halberstam examines the potential of reading failure as a queer tactic of subversion that ‘allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development’.³¹ For Halberstam, the embracing of failure can offer a way to avoid reproducing neoliberal models of capitalist self-promotion and confirmation within everyday life, and particularly within critical work in the academy. Halberstam offers failure as ‘a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections between success and profit, and a counterhegemonic discourse of losing’.³²

The proposal that failure subverts rigid structures of disciplinarity within the academy is a particularly interesting one in relation to Davis, and to her self-sabotage. Whilst her reference to institutions (and not being an ‘institution queen’) refers to concrete institutions, such as large, well-funded galleries or museums, I would argue that Davis’s attitude also extends to critical institutions, such as the academy, international newspapers and art periodicals. I read Davis’s continual subversion of her own potential for success within critically endorsed settings as part of a critique and almost subliminal resistance to embedded systems of critical thought, a resistance that emerges out of her maturation as an artist within the subcultural environment of LA punk and queer subcultures. Her ‘failure’ to be accepted or incorporated into current systems of canonisation and analysis can be seen as a way to recognise, as Halberstam writes, ‘that alternatives are embedded

³¹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 3.

³² Halberstam, p. 12.

already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities'.³³

In his landmark book *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour*, José Muñoz borrows Antonio Gramsci's term to frame Davis as an 'organic intellectual'. He argues that

Vaginal Davis's performance attempts to unsettle the hegemonic order through performance of praxis (a performance that imagines itself as praxis). The performances that are produced are rooted within a deep critique of universalism and the dominant power bloc.³⁴

This conception of Davis in relation to Gramsci has direct relevance to the concept of self-sabotage, and of failure in institutional terms as being potent or interesting in a wider sense. For Muñoz here it is the very applicability of Davis's practice to the concerns of several discourses that makes her refusal to explicitly engage with them useful in an anti-capitalist sense. Her practice emerges in clear relation to the art world and other cultural industries (such as the music industry), but refuses to enact its critique in a way that is entirely legible to those beyond the very particular social milieu and subcultural constructs that it comes out of. It is from this point, Muñoz writes, that 'she is able to enact a parodic and comedic demystification; the potential for subversion is planted'.³⁵

³³ Halberstam, p. 88.

³⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 110-111.

³⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 115.

Muñoz argues that it is Davis's disconnection from the languages and concerns of academic criticism that places her in the position of an organic intellectual. As he writes, Davis 'did and did not belong to the scene but nonetheless did forge a place for herself that is not *a* place, but instead the still important *position* of the intellectual'.³⁶ He identifies Davis within this situation as occupying an intellectual position within a scene (a subcultural position from which she critiques the art world and institutional hegemony), whilst avoiding becoming a contained intellectual through her own unwillingness to participate in or fully with the hegemonic intellectual discourses of academia and cultural journalism. For both Halberstam and Muñoz this Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual is one with a particular applicability to queer subjects, whose position within an already oppositional (in the sense of subverting heteronormative, implicitly capitalist modes of social interaction) community or group 'can offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems', as Halberstam writes.³⁷

For Muñoz, Davis's artistic outputs act as critiques that resist their co-option within the 'dominant power bloc' that they subvert. This concept of 'blocs' is again a Gramscian one; a bloc consisting of a grouping of social forces in common interest, or as Stephen Gill describes 'an historical congruence between material forces,

³⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 102. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ Halberstam, p. 89.

institutions and ideologies'.³⁸ Both academic criticism and cultural journalism have a key role to play in the establishment of canons and disciplinarity as well as the market, and so constitute part of the 'dominant power bloc' that Muñoz references, contributing to an ever-changing definition of what cultural practices should be to be considered successful or significant.

This then suggests that Davis's scepticism towards scholarly criticism could be a key aspect of the subcultural critique embodied by her attitude to institutional support and academic criticism. In her practice Davis rejects the sanctioned intellectual endeavours of the academy, which often render the non-cerebral affects that she claims to prioritise in her audience (entertainment, laughter, etc.) less important than the conclusions of academics writing about performance, or articulations of her artistic intention that facilitate such analysis. Muñoz reads in this an implicit critique on the part of Davis in relation to the intellectual hegemony of the academic analysis of art works. Davis sees herself as on the outside of 'the institutional forces of academics and academia and administrative forces', despite the work that has been done by scholars in relation to her practice.³⁹ Instead Davis professes to maintain a personal standard of significance, rooted in her subcultural, class and racial background. As she says of her early work in LA:

I didn't come from the vantage point that I was trying to make this great art or something. I was just having a good time. And of course I had lots of

³⁸ Stephen Gill, *Power and Resistance in the New World Order* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 58.

³⁹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

influences that snuck in, but I wasn't making that so apparent. You know. So only a few people got those influences. Or you know, that there was a political concept to things... It wasn't tackling politics in the way that a white liberal would've tackled it.⁴⁰

This appears to be a clear repudiation of overly intellectual renderings of her performances as 'great art' or as operating within a system of representation that might aspire to be 'great art', perhaps like the art historical criticism referred to in relation to Wojnarowicz in Chapter Two. It also suggests a racial dimension to her implicit critique, against the hegemony of the intellectual conclusions of academia and journalism, which could be characterised as predominantly 'white liberal' institutions. What Davis seems to be suggesting here is that the critical reflection of academics and journalists should not be the benchmark by which the success or failure of her artistic practice is judged, as it is perhaps ill-equipped to best engage with it. This also relates back to my earlier examination of Lydia Lunch, whose insistence on the guest list as the most important audience for her performances works against notions of popular appeal and expertise or analysis from outside the scene.

This critique, as Muñoz observes, bears an interesting relation to the concerns of Gramsci, who writes that

⁴⁰ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

the category of intellectuals [...] has been inordinately enlarged. [...] The mass formation has standardised individuals in terms of both individual and psychological peculiarities, resulting in the same phenomena which exists in all other standardised masses: competition, which provides the need for professional defensive organisations, unemployment, scholastic overproduction, emigration, etc.⁴¹

There is a relevant echo of Gramsci's fear of 'scholastic overproduction' in Davis's observation that 'it used to be that you wouldn't start to be written about in terms of movements and things like that until way after you were dead', concluded by the somewhat dismissive remark 'but, you know, people have to write about something!'⁴²

George Lipsitz also argues though that the concept of the 'organic intellectual' is particularly applicable to LA's fragmented social and ethnic demographics, in which Davis is deeply invested as both an inhabitant of Traber's 'sub-urban' communities of punks and an LA native of colour. In a similar manner to both Muñoz and Halberstam, Lipsitz argues that the existence of internally stratified groupings, who are excluded from the intellectual apparatuses of the university and political media, results in the emergence of active participants in those groupings who occupy an intellectual position. The subjects of Lipsitz's analysis are ethnic minority

⁴¹ Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, trans. by Louis Marks (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967), p. 125.

⁴² Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

communities in Los Angeles, rather than the sexual cultures examined by Muñoz and Halberstam.

Gramsci argues that the development of organic intellectuals within such social groupings are much more desirable from a revolutionary standpoint than the limiting of intellectual work to scholars. He argues that these new intellectuals develop thought that does not 'consist of eloquence, the momentary arousing of sentiments and passions, but must consist of being actively involved in practical life'.⁴³ In Lipsitz's example of musicians from the predominantly Latinx communities of East LA, Mexican-American rock musicians enacting critique of social and demographic inequalities found that 'their primary weapons included bifocality, juxtaposition of multiple realities, intertextuality, inter-referentiality, and comparison through families of resemblance'.⁴⁴ This list of strategies and characteristics could just as easily refer to the work of Davis, whose work and its critique similarly depends on intertextuality and inter-referentiality, drawn from the communities that she engages with, whether sexual, ethnic or subcultural groupings.

In Muñoz's analysis then, Davis's work occupies the position of the intellectual, without allowing her to be co-opted *as* an intellectual. Her work interrogates forms,

⁴³ Gramsci, p. 122

⁴⁴ George Lipsitz, 'Cruising Around the Historical Bloc', *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 350-7 (p. 357). I understand the distinction between intertextuality and inter-referentiality here as concerning the distinction between intertextual references (references to other texts) and further references to those references (references to identities constructed around the interaction between texts).

concepts and identities that are absolutely relevant to academic inquiry, but in a way that is unable or unwilling to become part of any one canon, discipline or critical project. In an echo of the relevance of the concept of containment to Wojnarowicz, only certain aspects are recouped or adopted into academic discourse, Davis's 'bad' performances ignored in favour of her 'good', or her style reduced to flamboyant irreverence. This might even relate more broadly to a general difficulty within current academic production, as Halberstam suggests by proposing that

the fields that were assembled over one hundred years ago to respond to new market economies and the demand for narrow expertise [...] are now losing relevance and failing to respond either to real-world knowledge projects or student interests.⁴⁵

The work of Muñoz further intersects with my own in the consideration of Davis's regularly declared position of contentment in regard to her own critical marginality. I would argue that more explicitly than, for example, Lydia Lunch, Davis does not attempt to undo her omission from academic consideration, or assist those who might wish to enact such a process. Davis considers it entirely acceptable for those in the audience to miss, overlook or dismiss her process and references, declaring that 'if people get the other underlying meanings that's fine and if they don't that's fine too'.⁴⁶ Lunch, by contrast, performs a dissatisfaction with those who don't

⁴⁵ Halberstam, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

appreciate her practice (as detailed in Chapter One) but as the performance of *Memory Island* demonstrates, Davis has little interest in entering into art world discourses that require her to articulate a rationale for her projects, or to prevent misreading of her practice by those who might make the attempt to include her in such discourses.. As Davis remarked in our interview in 2014, 'either they [academics and journalists] know me or they don't, and they're interested or they're not. And either way is fine'.⁴⁷

The indifference to her marginal position is reflected by Davis's disinclination towards historic or disciplinary legibility, particularly in relation to artistic opportunity and career progression. The dynamics and concerns of punk and post-punk generally, and Los Angeles punk in particular, exert a palpable influence on Davis's work that both reinforces and expands several of the conclusions that I drew from my analysis of the work of Lunch and Wojnarowicz. As Muñoz identifies, it is apparent that Davis, as a polymath, exists at the intersections between artistic disciplines as much as between identity positions, and that her refusal to be 'of' one, or any, plants what Muñoz describes as the potential for subversion. To think about Davis within a dynamic of self-sabotage is to consider her position as one where she deliberately operates in a register that declines to appeal to either the academy or to the narrative of cultural progression as an artist, where effort is expended to increase audiences project on project, or to satisfy the expectations of her already existing one.

⁴⁷ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

In a letter to me dated September 2012, Davis highlights a further crucial aspect of her self-sabotage that relates to this: the refusal to accommodate activities or notions of value that might not particularly appeal to her, but that may make good career sense or enhance her public profile. This letter followed her extremely well received performance with her band Tenderloin at London's Southbank Centre as part of *Antony's Meltdown*, a season of performances curated by Anohni (the artist previously known as Antony Hegarty) in 2012, for which I was also in the audience.⁴⁸ Davis writes that after the performance she was offered further opportunities to perform with the band by music promoters in Europe and the UK. She then reports her attitude to these touring opportunities:

Have no desire to perform with the band all the time. As Diane Vreeland sez [sic], "There is beauty in refusal". These are the words I live by as I love turning people down.⁴⁹

Davis here refuses the impulse to extend a project beyond her original vision, or to engage with a model of career 'progression' of slowly building a sustained public profile through successive and increasingly high-profile performances. Indeed, she expresses delight at 'turning people down'. Particularly in the music industry, the idea that opportunities must be seized and capitalised on is pervasive, and there is a perverse joy in the idea that an artist might decline the offer of an opportunity to

⁴⁸ Davis and Tenderloin performed on 11 August 2012 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, London. *Antony's Meltdown* took place from 1-12 August 2012.

⁴⁹ Vaginal Davis, in a letter to the author dated September 2012.

achieve greater fame or commercial success simply for the enjoyment of doing so. It troubles the integrity of a system that is extremely selective and difficult to enter. It is also demonstrative of Davis's commitment to polymathy, to avoiding being over-determined or integrated more fully into the systems of a single cultural discipline and economy (the popular music industry). Davis here rejects the potential of a conventionally constituted music career to avoid being confined to 'performing with the band all the time'. To many of the promoters, and to other artists attempting to initiate a career in music, this must appear baffling. I however find this unpredictability within the context of a pervasive neoliberal model of self-promotion refreshing, and indicative of the subversive potential of the kind of 'counterhegemonic discourse of losing' that Halberstam offers in *The Queer Art of Failure*.

Davis and Intentionality

This question of intentionality in relation to Davis's marginal position is an important one. If her attitude towards 'success' represents a strategy, an intended rejection of systems that she finds little value in, then to what extent is Davis's marginality the result of this ambivalence towards models of art market progression and scholarly legibility? Did she intend to render herself marginal, and would she be more popular, written about and disciplinarily significant if she did not have this attitude? This question can only be rhetorical, as it is impossible to claim with any degree of certainty the extent to which the marginality of her position is a direct result of any strategy's success. An equally plausible explanation might be that her work is just

not interesting, exciting or appealing to large arts institutions, to the academy and academics, or to wider audiences. It is useful to consider the question of whether Davis's deliberate marginalisation is entirely intended however, and the extent to which it is successful in doing so if it is.

Firstly, it is worth acknowledging that Davis is herself aware of the difficulty her attitude poses towards extended curatorial and critical support and acknowledgement. In our interview Davis reflected that

[M]aybe I should be a little bit more demonstrative [...], selling myself and pushing myself. [...] But, that's just not me. And who knows, [if I did] maybe I would be doing much better, financially, and living a little bit nicer, and actually have a little moolah [money] in my pocket for my old age.⁵⁰

This statement is revealing, as it suggests that not only is Davis aware of her own implication in her marginality (and also that she has a consequently precarious financial position as a result), but that she has decided that, as it is not 'her' to do otherwise, she would rather maintain that position than attempt to gain greater acceptance from the market or more mainstream audiences. The example above, of Davis's refusal to take up the opportunities offered by the music promoters following her Tenderloin performance, demonstrates how the maintaining of this attitude undermines her chances of inclusion within contexts that might afford

⁵⁰ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

either greater financial reward or critical validation, and that this is stubbornly deliberate and strategic denial. The relationship between curatorial, commercial and critical importance speaks again to Muñoz's Gramscian analysis of the potency of historical blocs in relation to cultural significance. In the statement above, Davis asserts that she is herself at least partly responsible for her own marginality.

In asking whether Davis would be more significantly represented in both market terms and critical narratives if she were to have a different attitude towards institutional structures, it may be useful to make a brief comparison. As well as the irritation and exasperation I observed on the night of the performance of *Memory Island* at the Tate, I find it particularly revealing that in the days after the performance a rumour circulated, amongst those in the audience that I knew and the participants in Davis's workshop project, that the performance had been so boring that two members of the theatre company Forced Entertainment had asked for their money back at the Tate box office. The irony (and humorous appeal) of the rumour is that the use of potentially boring periods of little or no activity is a technique that Forced Entertainment themselves pioneered in their performances and events, particularly *Spectacular* (2009), *Speak Bitterness* (1994), *The Coming Storm* (2012) and durational works like *Marathon Lexicon* (2003) and *Quizoola!* (1996). I should acknowledge however that I have no evidence that any such refund requests were made on the night of the performance, nor that one or more current or past members of Forced Entertainment were dissatisfied with the show. Nevertheless, whether true or not, the rumour about Forced Entertainment is

revealing, even if only in the fact that those passing it on could imagine it to be plausible.

Writing about gossip and rumour as a postmodern mode of evidence, Irit Rogoff suggests there are ‘possibilities for reading gossip as a projection of various desires by the audience onto narratives in culture’, and – regardless of its veracity – this rumour’s circulation may therefore reveal such a ‘cultural desire’ on the part of the audience.⁵¹ The rumour about Forced Entertainment directly calls back to Walters’ assertion in his audio review of the performance that many members of the audience were dissatisfied with paying the £10 ticket price for a performance that did not deliver what they had expected or desired. There is, in turn, an implied justification of the audience’s dissatisfaction with the performance in the citing of even Forced Entertainment’s inability to find it engaging enough to endure the boredom without complaint. Even if only a deferred reflection of this sense of insufficient value, the fact that in the rumour this dissatisfaction was deferred onto Forced Entertainment is significant. The rumour seems to suggest that the boredom experienced by the audience at Memory Island was not the same kind of boredom an audience might experience at a Forced Entertainment performance.

I would argue that the boredom of Forced Entertainment performances is conceived of as different due to the company’s theoretical rigour in supporting writings, statements and discussion. Forced Entertainment clearly state the intention behind

⁵¹ Irit Rogoff, ‘Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature’, in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Amelia Jones (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 316-324 (p. 320).

their performance style and strategies in several pieces of writing. As Tim Etchells, the artistic director of Forced Entertainment, observes in his manifesto on liveness

We certainly don't expect everyone to like our performances, which have always had their confrontational, uncomfortable or just plain boring moods, moments and ideas. That's definitely part of the work we're making and it would be disingenuous to apologise for it.⁵²

Whilst these statements of intent may not protect Forced Entertainment from the negative reactions of bored audience members (Forced Entertainment have a regular track record of walk-outs and complaints against them, particularly in their early work), I believe that it does have an impact on the way(s) that their work might subsequently be written about, and then viewed by curators, funders, institutions and the media. As Sara Jane Bailes observes in her study of Forced Entertainment's strategy and aesthetic of 'failure': '[w]hen failure is inscribed into the conceptualization of a work, the work's ontology is altered and a different economy is established'.⁵³ Forced Entertainment explicitly inscribe their dynamic of failure, by which Bailes means the breaking down of the structures of conventional theatrical production (such as a discernible narrative, believable acting or polished and rehearsed performance) onto their conceptualisation of their work. Davis wilfully does not situate this as being central to her work, and it seems that without the

⁵² Tim Etchells, 'A Six-Thousand-and-Forty-Seven-Word Manifesto on Liveness in Three Parts with Three Interludes', *Live: Art and Performance*, ed. by Adrian Heathfield (London: Tate, 2004), pp. 210-217 (p. 214).

⁵³ Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 99.

establishment of the 'different economy' that Bailes suggests is set up by the conceptualisation of Forced Entertainment, Davis is left in a very different critical (and subsequently commercial and curatorial) position.

One of the first and most obvious differences between Davis and Forced Entertainment is the quantity of critical material devoted to Forced Entertainment, which includes at least four major scholarly books that are directly focused on their work.⁵⁴ Forced Entertainment are also referenced in a large number of journal articles, essays, commentary and references in edited collections. Their shows are comprehensively reviewed by mainstream newspapers, arts publications and subject to extensive online analysis by theatre bloggers and review sites. Certainly in academic contexts, the work of Forced Entertainment is a far more disciplinarily significant presence as an object of analysis than the work of Davis, in Performance Studies, Drama, Visual Cultures and related areas of study and critical reflection.⁵⁵ In an exceptionally clear demonstration of their perceived significance, in March 2016

⁵⁴ Judith Helmer and Florian Malzacher, *Not Even A Game Anymore: The Theatre of Forced Entertainment* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2004); Sarah Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (London: Routledge, 2011); Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1999); Peter Billingham, *At the Sharp End: Uncovering the Work of Five Leading Dramatists* (London: Methuen, 2007). More resources are also listed on Forced Entertainment's website at <<http://www.forcedentertainment.com/about/list-of-publications/>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

⁵⁵ Forced Entertainment appear on the curricula of many undergraduate Drama and/or Theatre programs, such as at the University of Lincoln ('Modules' <<http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/course/dradaub/>> [accessed 4 May 2017]) and Queen Mary, University of London ('Making Contemporary Theatre', <<http://www.sed.qmul.ac.uk/drama/undergraduate/modules/Modules/93602.html>> [accessed 5 March 2017]). Forced Entertainment are also listed as an approved company for study at A-Level in the AQA Drama and Theatre Studies syllabus, <<http://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/drama/a-level/drama-2240/subject-content/unit-2>> [accessed 4 May 2017].

it was announced that Forced Entertainment had been awarded the International Ibsen Award, 'one of the world's most prestigious theatre prizes'.⁵⁶

It therefore seems apparent that Forced Entertainment are trusted as being, as Bailes writes, '*intentionally* amateur, borrowing and copying the amateur-machine', and that the 'performers *assume* the guise of the amateur for effect', rather than their work being seen as ill conceived, inept or unsophisticated.⁵⁷ Their critical profile is one of exposing the workings of the theatrical machine, even if, as Nicholas Ridout suggests in his discussion of Forced Entertainment's *Disco Relax* (1999), this 'doesn't produce anything, or anything which by normal standards might be considered enough, acceptable, appropriate or satisfying'.⁵⁸ This profile is, I believe due in part to their rigour in conceptualising and articulating the intention behind their performance aesthetic and strategies.

In contrast to the work of Forced Entertainment, *Memory Island* is produced by an artist who makes no statements of intent in relation to the work, and indeed rejects explicit articulations of artistic strategy wholesale. Unlike Etchells, Davis has not and did not make it clear that the boredom was an expected outcome of her performance or a pre-considered affect generated by her performance strategies. Indeed, this explanation appears to be something that she would not do ('it's just

⁵⁶ 'Winner of the 2016 International Ibsen Award', The International Ibsen Award website, <<http://www.internationalibsenaward.com/nyheter/winner-of-the-international-ibsen-award-2016>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para. 3 of 3).

⁵⁷ Bailes, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 151

not me') despite the confusion and subsequent reaction. Davis consistently remarks of her early work that 'nothing was really planned. [...] [E]verything just sort of happened organically. [...] [Y]ou would just get a zany idea and run with it'.⁵⁹ In the context of such statements, it is easy to see that audience members and commentators might assume that the failure of *Memory Island* was a result of insufficient rigour in the development of a piece. To relate this back to Butt's proposal that many of the artists in the Trashing Performance program do not maintain the cultural capital to fully engage in the discourses of the 'art scene', Davis refusal to argue for the intentionality of her performance does not allow her to accrue the cultural capital (distinct from subcultural capital) that Forced Entertainment's careful articulation of strategy endows upon them. Her reputation as an anarchic, DIY performer works against her in the case of *Memory Island*. Davis's position as an organic intellectual outside of the discourse of critical hegemony leaves her susceptible to the charge that her deployment of negative affects like boredom are not deliberate but a result of ineptness. The audience at *Memory Island* perhaps were not confident that Davis is skilled or savvy enough to fail on purpose, because she makes no attempt to reassure them, either before the performance or in subsequent reflection.

Audience Expectation

⁵⁹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

The audience's reaction to the performance certainly suggests a series of unfulfilled expectations or desires in those attending Davis' performance: of entertainment, extravagance, punkish-ness, perhaps of salaciousness, ferocity, activity, character and/or conversation and dialogue. These would be expectations based in the aesthetics of some of Davis's previous work. But perhaps also there was an expectation or desire for subcultural legibility, of being sufficiently able to rationalise the aesthetic and content of the performance in terms of a previously existing subcultural identification associated with Davis's practice. In attending Trashing Performance's programme, which highlights underappreciated or overlooked artists from underground performance scenes, it is likely that the audience was already familiar with the subcultural artistic practices that the performers represent, and their tropes.

By this I mean to suggest that audience members already aware of the performers and their practices may have a previously existing subcultural identification with Davis's work, with the crossover of punk and queer politics and aesthetics embodied by Queercore, with experimental performance and its histories, or more generally with the underground as opposed to the mainstream. Indeed, to a certain extent simply attending this event is a demonstration of the subcultural capital required to even know who Davis is. This notion of subcultural capital is articulated by Sarah Thornton as the way in which such capital confers 'status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder', embodied in the form of 'being "in the know"'.⁶⁰ It deviates

⁶⁰ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 11.

at that point from Bourdieu's cultural capital, which instead spoke to high culture's ability to confer capital upon a recipient in a general sense. Where Bourdieu was interested in the valorisation of certain cultural signifiers that appealed to the hegemonic definition of culture, Thornton's subcultural capital may be unrecognised or have an insignificant effect on a person's wider societal position, instead only conferring capital in certain, highly specialised situations.

It seems apparent that punk shows, esoteric performance art and underground film events certainly operate on some level on the ability of its constituent members to understand references, allusions and histories from other practices and occasions in order to 'get it'. I also explored this in the relationship of Lunch's performance in *Rome '78*, and suggested that status within those groups resides in the expertise and identification of other's capacity to identify similarly. On the other hand, those audience members who are not already familiar with the work of the artists, those being 'initiated' into the practice of the artists in Trashing Performance (motivated by curiosity, or perhaps brought along by a friend previously familiar with the work), are implicitly offered an introduction into such a subcultural situation, to what the event's promotional materials describe as 'art and culture often considered too left-field by the proprieties of high minded and elite taste'.⁶¹ The performance might therefore promise an experience that is both transgressive and progressive, conveying or confirming a certain form of subcultural capital on the audience who attends.

⁶¹ Live Art Development Agency, 'Trashing Performance', <<http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/trashing-performance>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para. 3 of 8).

The publicity text for Davis's performance at Tate contains several such subcultural indicators that might set up a particular audience expectation. The programme note describes the performance as a 'nutter's pastiche from Hollywood provocateuse Vaginal Davis' and references the 1963 horror film *Dementia 13* and 1940s MGM musicals as relevant references for a potential audience.⁶² However, these references also suggest certain resonances that were left unfulfilled by the performance's debt to and appropriation of certain aspects of the work of New York filmmaker Jack Smith, to whom Davis had created the performance as a tribute. The confusion around this was compounded by the lack of contextualisation or articulation of her intent by Davis, and is perhaps the essential example of how this performance represents an instance of self-sabotage. As I explain below, an understanding of the performance as an homage to and appropriation of Jack Smith's work is almost essential to assessing its value or success.

Importantly, I do not mean to suggest that the publicity text was at fault, nor that Trashing Performance's marketing team were somehow careless in their framing of the performance. In actual fact, the reference to horror-schlock like *Dementia 13*, and to MGM musicals from the 1940s is quite accurate, with Davis regularly referencing both in her wider body of work and MGM musicals specifically in *Memory Island*, with the performance of fragments of songs from *Ziegfeld Girl*. Although curiously unrepresentative of the performance itself, the foregrounding of

⁶² *Dementia 13*, dir. by Francis Ford Coppola (Filmgroup productions, 1963).

Dementia 13 does suggest the gory punk aesthetic of bands such as The Cramps and The Screemers, LA punk stalwarts and rough contemporaries of Davis who deployed a horror film derived aesthetic in their lyrics and the theatrically stylised performance of their music.

In relation to this LA punk connotation, I find it interesting that Davis reports that when asked to perform she had originally intended to deliver a musical performance with her then-new band Tenderloin at the Tate, rather than the solo performance piece *Memory Island*. As Davis remarks ‘it was going to be an art band project [...] but then [...] I had to rethink [it], and it became me doing a sort of expanded cinema thing’.⁶³ The audience’s expectation of a musical performance may have also been further reinforced by the marketing text’s highlighting of Joel Gibb as a collaborator, the lead singer of The Hidden Cameras and drummer/vocalist in Tenderloin. Gibb, in actual fact, appeared in *Memory Island* only on screen as one of the partially clad and glittered island boys in the seashore projection. Davis herself later acknowledged ‘a lot of people had never seen my bands in London’, and that they had therefore not ‘seen me do one of the things I’m know for’.⁶⁴

This hunger for an engagement with Davis’ musical performance history may have contributed to the disappointment felt by the audience at *Memory Island*. Indeed, it may be that the rationale for including Davis in the Trashing Performance program stems from the crossover of her practice from musical subcultures (punk and post-

⁶³ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

⁶⁴ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

punk) to live art and performance, crossovers that Gavin Butt identifies as a key factor in the rationale behind the organisers' programming decisions. Davis's performance, however, was firmly grounded in an approximation of the work of a niche and conceptually nuanced artist, New York filmmaker and performer Jack Smith. The performance was consequently quite far-removed from a traditional punk-rock aesthetic. Even on a visual level, Davis moving slowly across the stage in the performance whilst cloaked almost completely in a white gown is some distance away from the sweaty, dishevelled punk rock body that fronted PME and ¡Cholita! in less formal contexts than Tate Modern's Starr auditorium. As a result, an audience expecting a Davis performance that confirmed to the wider register of Trashing Performance, the 'wilful rejections of, or indifference to, elite proprieties and culture', were left disappointed.⁶⁵

Whilst acknowledging the fact that *Memory Island* was originally commissioned as part of the Jack Smith retrospective program *Live Film! Jack Smith! Five Flaming Days in a Rented World* in Berlin in 2011 (where it premiered at the Hebbel am Ufer Theatre), the marketing text for the performance does not explain that this performance was created to directly reference the work of Jack Smith, nor that it would explicitly recreate aspects of his performance style. The lack of action, its length and the impenetrability of *Memory Island* are particularly Smithian. For Dominic Johnson, '[c]entral to the myth of Jack Smith are his excruciating delays, the

⁶⁵ Live Art Development Agency, 'Trashing Performance', <<http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/trashing-performance>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para. 3 of 8).

arduous slowness of his performances, and obligatory impediments to their smooth running'.⁶⁶

The long periods of inaction, the silent and unfilled breaks between sections of the evening and the pace of *Memory Island* make far more sense when explicitly related to this body of work, a form of artistic production that is described by J. Hoberman as 'art without a product, activities that have no apparent purpose, a theater indifferent to its audience'.⁶⁷ Indeed, both the performance of *Memory Island* in Berlin, and the post-Tate performance at Barcelona's Xperimenta festival in November 2011, 'went much better', according to Davis.⁶⁸ At the Berlin retrospective of Smith's work and at Barcelona's Xperimenta, a festival exploring the history of expanded cinema, the audience were aware and appreciative of the reference to Smith, and the conditions therefore far better suited to a more successful reception. In the context of Tate Modern, and a programme designed to showcase the scandalously irreverent and anarchic crossovers of the performance world, underground nightlife and DIY practices, it was received extremely poorly.

Davis's performance appeared to fall between two poles of success. It did not conform to the desires of an audience that may seek a subculturally resonant confirmation of her punk credentials, exemplified by a raucous and scandalous, LA

⁶⁶ Dominic Johnson, *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 41.

⁶⁷ J. Hoberman, "'Like Canyons and Rivers': Performance for its Own Sake', Jay Sanders and J. Hoberman, *Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama – Manhattan, 1970-1980* (New York: Whitney Museum, 2013), pp. 9-24 (p. 9).

⁶⁸ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

punk inflected performance. Nor did she offer an articulation of the performance as an exploration of the potential of failure as a deliberate strategy in wider conceptions of performance, one that might operate on a critical and conceptual level of interest to a broad range of academics, writers, reviewers, or those members of the audience who may be invested in work that pushes the boundaries of theatre. Deliberately negating this latter category of success is, as I have discussed, very much consistent with Davis's stated feelings about the academy and critical or theoretical endorsements and framings of her work. Her rejection of the LA punk angle and her refusal to allow her audience to secure or confirm their subcultural capital, are similarly influenced by her stated attitude towards the audiences for her work, both popular and critical.

I would argue that the Trashing Performance programme suggests two potential outcomes from its activities – either an academic recouping of practices previously 'beyond the pale', integrating the transgressive within the institutional framework of organisations like Tate, or a more activist challenge to those frameworks, breaking them down from within. Davis professes to be sceptical of either potential outcome, as noted earlier in her comment that 'people think that by being part of an institution they can change the institution'.⁶⁹ This exemplifies a general distrust of the containing impetus of institutional legitimisation, amplified by a perhaps unconscious investment within a subculture that places little value on mass appeal or accessibility to new audiences or historical reflection. The kinds of description

⁶⁹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

and justification that would allow her to, like Forced Entertainment, position the failure of a performance (by which I mean the boredom the audience experiences or the amateurism of the presentation) as deliberate and therefore protected by conceptual rigour, is incompatible with her persona and history as an artist.

Davis, Identity, Race and Sexuality

Having established Davis's marginality, and explored how that might be an intended result of her strategies, why then would a writer choose to write about Davis? What, if any, significance could Davis's practice have on wider debates around disciplinary concerns in critical contexts? In order to address this, I now wish to unpack some of the dense layering of reference in Davis's practice and further explore the key examples of critical analysis that have been published in relation to her work. In doing so I am attempting to demonstrate how the density and specificity of these references constitute another form of self-sabotage. This process of decoding also demonstrates her practice's potential use as an example to draw on for wider critical understandings of performance. As in my reading of *Memory Island's* references to Jack Smith, it can often be revealing to unpack the layering of reference that Davis undertakes in the construction of her characters and performance. Doing so demonstrates a repudiation of Davis as an artist whose work is entirely ramshackle, underprepared or cursorily conceived, and brings into relief the potential of her work as an object of study.

As I have already discussed, Muñoz's *Disidentifications* is the first instance – and perhaps the most significant example – of Davis's practice used as an object of academic study. The fourth chapter of the book, 'The White to Be Angry', is named after an album by Pedro, Muriel and Esther of 1998 and devoted entirely to the discussion of Davis's work.⁷⁰ Muñoz uses Davis as a primary artistic example in his articulation of the radical potential of queer subjects of colour to 'disidentify' with dominant representations of mainstream culture. Muñoz provides a vivid description of one of her live performances with PME, an occasion where the artist fronted the band in character as a white, racist, aggressively heterosexual and homophobic man named Clarence (Davis's birth name).⁷¹ Unpacking these layers of signification, Muñoz coined the term 'terrorist drag' to describe Davis's confrontational yet hilarious mining of tropes and signifiers of a hostile culture in order to subvert it. It is this process of assuming an injurious characteristic or representation in order to subvert it that Muñoz articulates as a 'disidentification'.

As Muñoz identifies, there are several other examples of Davis assuming racial and cultural stereotypes, and in doing so troubling their stability as positions with power or authority. Muñoz pursues this strategy in relation to its intersection of sexuality and race, quoting Davis at length and considering the relation of her practice to the racial politics of Los Angeles, and of American society more generally. This idea of a disidentification also resonates with Traber's description of LA punk, where he writes that the scene relied on a 'version of L.A.'s own tricks', a process of 'making

⁷⁰ PME, *The White to Be Angry* (Spectra Records, 1998). An image of Davis is also used on the cover of *Disidentifications*.

⁷¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, pp. 93-115.

themselves something to be looked at, the logic of self-(re)construction, a belief that history can be erased and rewritten [...] to open up a space for social critique'.⁷²

This process of disidentification is apparent throughout Davis's practice. In ¡Cholita! The Female Menudo, for example, Davis and her bandmates assumed characteristics in performance of the socially disenfranchised urban 'cholita' stereotype – which is a largely derogatory slang term for an urban Latina tough girl, the youthful feminine form of the male 'cholo'. Davis performs in ¡Cholita! as Graciela Grejalva, a teenage Latina girl, complete with exaggerated make-up, drawn-on eyebrows and pigtails. The assumption of the 'cholita' identity is an exploration of Davis's Latinx heritage, and that of her predominantly Latinx bandmates.⁷³

It is important to acknowledge that Davis' racial identification exists in a complicated relationship to more recognisable positions of cultural identity. Her frequent and not always consistent assertions of heritage include Latinx, African-American, Jewish, Native American and Creole, although she regularly references the fact that she is most often perceived as African-American by referring to herself as a 'blacktress' and 'black drag queen'.⁷⁴ Despite the element of racial pastiche involved in her characterisation of Graciela Grejalva, Davis and her bandmates assume the stereotype as a reclamation of agency, a disidentification of the kind Muñoz describes as '*interiorized passing*'. The interior pass is a disidentification and tactical

⁷² Traber, p. 160.

⁷³ These bandmates included Alice Bag and Gregory Hernandez (aka Fertile La Toyah Jackson). Both performed with Davis in the Afro Sisters as well as ¡Cholita! The Female Menudo.

⁷⁴ Davis, cited in Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 121.

misrecognition of the self'.⁷⁵ Through this pastiche, a form of representation *ad absurdum*, Davis

uses ground-level guerrilla representational strategies to portray some of the nation's [USA] most salient popular fantasies. The fantasies she acts out involve cultural anxieties surrounding miscegenation, communities of colour, and the queer body.⁷⁶

Davis is thus not performing a racial identity (pretending to be Latinx) that is not hers, but embodying a stereotype in order to highlight its pervasiveness and unsuitability, demonstrating how the projection of those cultural markers onto others are problematic. This is an important difference to note as it has not always been acknowledged. Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons suggest in their book *Gay L.A.* that in ¡Cholita! Davis 'performed as a Latina – swapping ethnic identity as well as gender', for example, a misrepresentation of her disidentificatory act.⁷⁷

The deployment of modalities of her personality and background as characters and alter-egos in individual projects is a recurring aspect in several iterations of Davis's practice. Each distinct mode features characters that are both subsets of and separate entities from 'Vaginal Davis', the name which she uses in both personal social interactions and as a public persona (typically shortened to 'Vag', 'Ms. Davis'

⁷⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 106. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 108.

⁷⁷ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 252.

or, in a satirical poke at the assumed pomposity of academic titles, 'Dr Davis'). It is important to acknowledge however that Vaginal Davis was originally one of many performance personas, before becoming 'so overwhelming' that, she explains, 'the prose, the writing, everything, came under the banner of Vaginal Davis'.⁷⁸ Her name is both an homage to and subversive riff on the name of iconic black activist and academic Angela Davis, chosen by the artist 'because I was into Angela Davis, and thought that sexualising Angela Davis would be funny'.⁷⁹ Alongside the silliness, a dual resonance of racial politics and sexual subversion is therefore present even in Davis's explanation of her choice of primary name.

As each of her separate characters has a complicated and frequently scandalous backstory, as well as an internal relationship to Davis's other personas (her character Rayvn Cymone McFarland complains of being mixed up with 'that black drag queen Vaginal Davis') there is continual slippage between the histories attributed to Davis as an artist and the imagined histories of the characters.⁸⁰ Davis herself acknowledges that 'sometimes people actually believe the persona, that it's not me, that that's a real person', a perhaps understandable mistake in the context of the sometimes small shifts in a character's persona that mark its difference from the ur-character of Vaginal Davis.⁸¹ The unclear boundaries of Davis's characters, such as the distinct personas that front her conceptual 'art bands' for example, are

⁷⁸ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014

⁷⁹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

⁸⁰ Vaginal Davis as Ravyn Cymone MacFarland, in concert with black fag, California State University (Fullerton, CA), 1994. Video documentation of this performance is available in the Live Art Development Agency Study Room, London [accessed 19 November 2014].

⁸¹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

often incomprehensible to observers less conversant in her particular style of cultural citation. This in turn affects the ways in which her work is read, and how it might be considered in relation to importance. As Pierre Bourdieu writes in *Distinction*, '[a] work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded'.⁸² Davis's assumed characters demonstrate her humour and playfulness, but also reflect the embedded importance of certain kinds of (sub)cultural capital required to understand the complex relationships between characters and references to pop-cultural and artistic histories.

Davis's most recent band Tenderloin, for example, is fronted in the role of 'Dagmar Hopfisterei', a character that is identified as being the bastard child of Christiane F. and Günther Kaufman. This backstory is extremely specialised, as it relies on the knowledge and recognition of the minor celebrities cited in order to find the allusion funny and/or significant in any way. Christiane Felscherinow is an actor whose story of drug addiction and sex work was the subject of the film *Christiane F.* (dir. by Uli Edel, 1981), which gained cult status after its release, whilst Kaufman is an actor and ex-lover of director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who later spent time in prison covering for a murder his wife may have committed. This appropriation of such niche celebrities as backstory for the character certainly speaks to Davis's particular style of pop-cultural reference, as she has here appropriated two minor German celebrities with transgressive and subculturally resonant pasts as surrogate parents

⁸² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. xxv

for her character. Even at a lexical level, the character's surname of Hopfisterei echoes the name of a small German bakery chain, whilst also containing within it the sexually suggestive English word 'fist'. This wordplay in the name 'Dagmar Hopfisterei' is not unique, with Davis's sense of humour and multi-lingual punning also appearing in the names of other characters and projects.

Davis's preacher character 'the Most High Holy Right Reverend Saint Salicia Tate' combines an exaggerated array of Pentecostal and Evangelical ecclesiastical titles (possibly reflecting her longstanding collaboration and friendship with the artist Ron Athey, who was raised in that faith) with the surname of Sharon Tate, the most high-profile victim of the Manson 'Family' cult killings in 1969. ¡Cholita! The Female Menudo is, as I have discussed, built around Angeleno street slang for a Latina tough girl, but is also a reference to Menudo, a Puerto Rican boy band of which mainstream and anodyne pop star Ricky Martin was once a member. Menudo is, in addition, the name of a Mexican tripe stew and therefore used as slang for a stomach overhanging tight jeans (a 'muffin top' in English slang). Both Dagmar Hopfisterei and ¡Cholita! The Female Menudo then contain puns and encoded references to food, sex, race and niche pop cultural reference that require a certain level of subcultural capital or investment in a particular aesthetic history to appreciate.

In addition to the decoding required to appreciate some or all of the embedded references in Davis's character names, Davis also declines to define the transition between 'Vaginal Davis' and whatever character she is inhabiting. She very rarely

delineates the point at which she becomes a character like Graciela Grejalva or Rayvn Cymone McFarland, the front woman of black fag (a preppy white hardcore scene-girl). During a 1994 concert by black fag, for example, Davis, in character as Rayvn Cymone McFarland, describes a sexual relationship with Henry Rollins, the best-known lead singer of the band Black Flag (which black fag lampoons). It is easy to see how such a relationship might be attributed to Davis in reality, as both Rollins and Davis are publicly associated with the punk scene in California in the mid-1990s. To those with some superficial knowledge of this milieu, it might easily be assumed that it is Davis rather than 'Rayvn Cymone McFarland' that makes the claim to such a sexual encounter, and perhaps even that Davis really did have such a relationship with Rollins (which is unlikely).⁸³

The scenario outlined however is therefore not of Davis (labelled a 'black drag queen' by her alter-ego) claiming a relationship with Rollins, but of Davis assuming the character of a white and preppy middle-class girl, who then claims such a relationship. Whilst this distinction may seem rather slight, it actually reflects the complicated politics of the interactions between the original Los Angeles punk scene, centred on Hollywood, and the hardcore scene that emerged later in the 1980s. This example demonstrates the kinds of sophisticated resonances Davis regularly plays with in her practice, but that are often lost in casual observation.

⁸³ As discussed below, Rollins maintains an extremely macho performance persona, particularly so during his time fronting Black Flag (1981-1986) and the Rollins Band (1986-1998). There are however longstanding rumours about his sexuality, which plays into the humour of Davis's claim. See Steven Williams, 'Henry Rollins is Annoyed That People Think He's Gay', *ContactMusic*, <<http://www.contactmusic.com/henry-rollins/news/rollins-stop-questioning-my-sexuality>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

Rollins is emblematic to some extent of the shift from LA punk to hardcore, and from a more varied scene in terms of gender and sexual identities to the more heterosexually orthodox hardcore scene in the 1980s. As Davis describes the change of scene in the late 1970s 'it became more macho, testosterone fuelled and suburban, where before it was more urban-centric'.⁸⁴ This change was personified by Rollins, whose performances with Black Flag were conducted in a style of macho posturing and violent interaction with the audience.

Davis's assumption of the white character of 'Rayvn Cymone McFarland' then could be read as a critique of both the whiteness of hardcore and its hostility towards queer subjects. As Muñoz writes in relation to PME, this embodying of a contradiction and subversion of its power relations equates to a kind of 'disidentification'. Davis's characterisation embodies elements of critique of the whiteness and heterosexual orthodoxy of hardcore, but is not a simple example of dual meaning or satire. The potential meanings of Davis's work are there to decode, but really only by those who share enough of the references and sensibilities to do so. Davis in this instance does not use makeup to 'white-up' as she does in Muñoz's example, communicating the racial dimension of the character only verbally and therefore rendering it even more opaque. To again reference Bourdieu in relation to this decoding, 'the encounter with the work of art is [...] a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code'.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the Author, Berlin, December 2014.

⁸⁵ Bourdieu, p. xxvi

Whilst Bourdieu is referring here to the encounter with work that an audience believes is good, that is 'consecrated' as one of the 'legitimate works of art' of the mainstream, it is equally the case a similar 'cognitive acquirement' is a necessary for the consumption of subculturally resonant artwork.⁸⁶ Davis's critique relies on the same kind of highly specialised knowledge and analytical astuteness in the working through of the connection between the character, Rollins and racial dynamics within the subculture of post-punk in LA.

Davis's work does mean something, it has political resonance and implied critique, but it is never earnestly polemical or explicit in its goals. It does not present one thing in order to mean another (what Susan Sontag describes as a 'familiar' split between the literal and symbolic), nor is it entirely literal, or presented only to make the audience laugh.⁸⁷ Indeed, Davis says 'I hate comedy'.⁸⁸ For Davis there is therefore a symbolic, and perhaps subversive, critical dimension to what she does, even if the majority of the audience are unaware of it, seeing her performance as only 'a queeny black kid who can't even carry a tune'.⁸⁹ For Davis, though, the audience members who might enjoy her work only as entertainment, or even as a guilty pleasure, are as relevant as those who recognise the complicated political, cultural and racial framings of her performances, writing and visual art. This tension between meaning and the literal is then at the heart of Davis's practice, and part of

⁸⁶ Bourdieu, pp. xxviii - xxix

⁸⁷ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p. 281.

⁸⁸ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

⁸⁹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the Author, Berlin, December 2014.

what both Muñoz and Jennifer Doyle draw out in their analysis. As Doyle writes, Davis is not ‘interested in entertainment’, but

embedded in that declaration is a dialectical twist, a response to the mandate to be entertaining with a reanimation of art production not as a career but as a praxis.⁹⁰

Davis’s work therefore slips into and between political resonances as much as it confronts them, and meaning arrives, when it is decoded as such, through juxtaposition and exaggeration rather than polemic, further presenting a challenge to the valorisation of clear artistic intention as a marker of success or profundity.

Camp and Drag

My reference to Susan Sontag above brings to the fore an important resonance between the work of Davis and the notion of camp, which Sontag’s essay ‘Notes on Camp’ (1964) represents one of the first attempted codifications of. As camp has gained traction as a cultural concept however it has remained contentious and unfixed, and so consequently requires some clarification. As Fabio Cleto writes, whilst

⁹⁰ Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p. 140.

Tentatively approached as *sensibility, taste, or style*, reconceptualised as *aesthetic or cultural economy*, and later asserted/reclaimed as (*queer*) *discourse*, camp hasn't lost its relentless power to frustrate all efforts to pinpoint it down to stability.⁹¹

To describe Davis's work as having a relation to camp therefore requires a careful articulation of what camp might mean in such a context, and why it is revealing in relation to her work. Sontag argues that

the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques.⁹²

Camp might therefore represent another example of an embedded form of subcultural capital, one present in Davis's work as an extension of its identification as a specifically queer practice, and one which indulges in the extravagant emphases of drag artists. Indeed, the citing of artifice and exaggeration is key, as both Muñoz and Doyle acknowledge. One of Sontag's descriptions most relevant to Davis's practice is her claim that camp is 'the love of the exaggerated, the "off", of things-being-what-they-are-not'.⁹³ As I have detailed above, the dense referencing embedded at almost every level of her artistic practice lends to this sense of being

⁹¹ Fabio Cleto, 'Queering the Camp', *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 2. Emphasis in original.

⁹² Sontag, p. 275.

⁹³ Sontag, p. 279.

‘what-they-are-not’, of the ‘queeny black kid who can’t even carry a tune’ actually embodying a sophisticated implicit critique of her own subcultural milieu. Artifice, and deliberate artificiality, is also absolutely key in Davis’s practice. In *That Fertile Feeling*, Davis is clearly not delivering babies under the towel that covers Fertile La Toyah Jackson’s legs in the birthing scene; the performers corpse constantly and the mime is conducted in such an unconvincing manner as to leave no doubt that believability was not the intended effect.

I am however sceptical about the utility of camp as a critical tool for the reflection on Davis’s practice. As Muñoz writes, ‘the discourse of camp has been – at least since Susan Sontag’s infamous notes from the 1960s – a discourse of middle- to upper-class white gay male sensibilities’.⁹⁴ As Davis acknowledges when suggesting that her mode of critique is not political in a ‘white liberal’ manner, the discourses of a bourgeois white section of society (no matter how liberal) are in part what she is attempting to undo. As detailed in my discussion of *Memory Island*, I do not believe that a redeeming of the difficulty of decoding Davis’s practice through a camp reconstruction, as being ‘so bad it’s good’, is a worthwhile undertaking. Whilst Davis acknowledges and is satisfied that a percentage of her audience enjoy her work as a guilty pleasure or purely on the level of entertainment, this suggests that her least enjoyable performances (*Memory Island* at Tate) and the encoded political and social critique that might exist within them are dismissed or go unnoticed in such a formulation. To reconfigure Davis’s failure to entertain the audience or to convey

⁹⁴ Muñoz, p. 120.

her underlying meanings in a discernible manner as being an example of ‘campiness’ is to undo to some extent the agency of the artist to create impenetrable work.

My scepticism of camp as a central tool for understanding Davis’s practice reflects Andrew Ross’s argument in his 1988 essay ‘Uses of Camp’. The central argument of Ross’s writing is that camp is a cultural economy tied to ‘the capitalist logic of development that governed the mass culture industries’.⁹⁵ Therefore, the deployment of camp unavoidably risks reincorporating the oppositional or transgressive artefact into bourgeois structures of cultural exchange through the work of the critic. Ross argues that camp ‘involves a celebration on the part of the cognoscenti’, and that’s its celebration as Sontag outlines would ‘thus be reserved for those with a high degree of cultural capital’.⁹⁶ In defining something as camp, the critic takes on responsibility for divining meaning in the practice, and ‘it is the critic, not the producer who takes full cultural credit for discerning the camp “value” of a text’.⁹⁷ Ross contrasts this against the idea of both the traditional intellectual (who confirms hegemonic notions of worthwhile culture) and the organic intellectual, who as I discuss above occupies the intellectual position of offering critique and analysis within a marginal group rather than the dominant. As Ross argues however, the third category of the ‘camp intellectual’ is one who ‘expresses his impotence as the dominated faction of a ruling bloc’.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Andrew Ross, ‘Uses of Camp’, in *Camp*, ed. by Cleto, pp. 308–329 (p. 326).

⁹⁶ Ross, p. 316.

⁹⁷ Ross, p. 316.

⁹⁸ Ross, p. 317.

Davis, although playing with exaggeration, artifice, flamboyance and mock-seriousness – for Sontag, some hallmarks of camp – appears to be aware that confirmation as a camp pleasure offers a particular position within a cultural economy, and her commitment to an often-unintelligible deployment of niche knowledge or fictionalisation only recognised by a few suggests that her self-sabotage may be a strategy to subvert this. Attributing a camp sensibility to Davis is not entirely accurate, despite her sharing some of the concerns of camp and its tropes, and the temptation of reading her extravagance and reluctance to articulate her artistic strategy as camp flamboyance. There are similarly other examples of terms that are partially relevant to Davis's practice, but that do not account for the full scope and potential of her artistic endeavours.

Muñoz's discussion of Davis in relation to drag in *Disidentifications* is perhaps an example of this. This section first establishes Muñoz's view of mainstream drag as a potential disidentification with an ideal of womanhood and normative femininity, before going on to explain Davis's drag as a distinct challenge to the 'prescriptive mandate to enact femininity through (often white) standards of glamour'.⁹⁹ Drag is regularly referenced by Muñoz in relation to Davis, and the relationship to drag as both a practice and a subculture is interesting to consider in relationship to Davis's assumption of characters and various personae. Muñoz is clear to articulate the departures between Davis's versions of drag and 'corporate-sponsored drag [that] has to some degree become incorporated within the dominant culture'.¹⁰⁰ Muñoz

⁹⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁰ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 99.

instead bills Davis's disidentifactory drag as a political form, a 'terrorist drag'.¹⁰¹

Davis does not attempt to pass as either fully female or to be identified fully as a drag queen when performing, telling Muñoz that

I wasn't really trying to alter myself to look like a real woman. I didn't wear false eyelashes or fake breasts. It wasn't about the realness of traditional drag – the perfect flawless makeup. I just put on a little lipstick, a little eye shadow and a wig and went out there.¹⁰²

Whilst Muñoz recognises Davis's other characters, he remarks that 'Vaginal is the central performance persona of the artist', without acknowledging explicitly that Davis identifies socially and in everyday life (including to Muñoz) as Vaginal Davis.¹⁰³

Davis is therefore not only a *performance* persona but a public persona (and one maintained in private and semi-private social situations, such as parties and with friends). Whilst Davis may rarely wear female clothes when not on stage, she is never not Vaginal Davis, even when playing another character. This may once again be a situation where the unclear boundaries between Davis as a persona, a person and her roster of characters have muddied the critical and contextual waters.

Davis indeed makes hyperbolic claims to many different identities within the central persona of 'Vaginal Davis', not only as separate characters in performance events like her 'art band' performances, but in other public forums, and especially in

¹⁰¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 108.

¹⁰² Davis, cited in Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 100.

¹⁰³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 103.

interactions with critical writers (including Muñoz). This tendency is most obviously the case in journalistic interviews and other press features related to her practice. In a *New York Times* article from 2004, Davis describes herself as ‘a half-breed drag baby out of the primordial ooze of L.A.’, the ‘offspring of a half-Creole, half-Choctaw New Orleans woman and a Mexican-born Jew’.¹⁰⁴ These claims of identity are mutable, with Davis recounting fantastical variations of her origin story across different sources, including being conceived under the table during a Ray Charles concert at the Hollywood Palladium, or citing her mother’s maiden name as ‘Mary Magdalene’.¹⁰⁵ This self-mythologising form of autobiography is a key element of her practice and her relation to public (and critical) attention. Revealingly, in the same *New York Times* article Davis remarks ‘Doll, there is no biography of me’.¹⁰⁶ By this Davis appears to mean that an attempt to document her biography authoritatively is both extremely difficult and, ultimately, to miss the point.

The roots of this attitude of self-sabotage in punk, and particularly LA punk and post-punk, is important to acknowledge here. This relationship between Davis and LA punk is also relevant within a narrative of subcultural development, the exploration of which is key to my project in this thesis, and of an increasing interest and acceptance by scholars and the academy of the inter- or anti-disciplinary. In *We*

¹⁰⁴ Vaginal Davis, cited in Guy Trebay, ‘Ready to Fade into Obscurity. Wait, He’s Already There’, *New York Times*, 23 May 2004, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/style/ready-to-fade-into-obscurity-wait-he-s-already-there.html?src=pm&pagewanted=1>> [accessed 5 May 2017] (para 18 of 19).

¹⁰⁵ Vaginal Davis, cited in Charity Coleman, ‘Love is Colder than Death: Vaginal Davis in Berlin’, *Maximumrockandroll* #317, October 2009, p. 84.

¹⁰⁶ Vaginal Davis, cited in Trebay, para 18 of 19.

Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk (2001), Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen speak to this when they argue that:

Most old [original] L.A. punks have not mellowed, for good reason. They know that their relatively ignored history will remain pure until pesky pop morticians like us come around to dress up the corpse, collect our fee and our cred before targeting the next movement to plunder.¹⁰⁷

This scepticism of LA Punk towards the plundering of its scene for historical grist is explained by Spitz and Mullen as being signified by participants in the subculture who are unwilling to discuss their work, and the sometimes-deliberate undermining of easy research into the scene through niche reference and misdirection. Like the original LA punks encountered by Spitz and Mullen, Davis in particular is prone to delivering misinformation or implication that is liable to be misunderstood by those who do not either share the necessary subcultural references or have enough experience of Davis's personal tendency towards scandalous gossip and statements. It also reflects a healthy scepticism of protagonists of that scene towards the continual repetition of the history and development of LA punk by central or minor protagonists, who, as they see it, want 'to be a pallbearer [to the punk funeral] to seal their own legacy and sustain a quasi-mainstream career as a "professional

¹⁰⁷ Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), p. xvi.

punk”’.¹⁰⁸ Davis, it should be said, has never ‘really considered myself a punk rocker in that purist sense’.¹⁰⁹

The indistinct boundary between Vaginal Davis as a person, as a performed character and as an artist who performs other characters lends itself to confusion, but Davis nevertheless maintains it assiduously. Many fans, friends and devotees agree with Davis that attempting to resolve this boundary is pointless, as Marc Siegel writes in his reflection on a performance by Davis. Siegel writes that at an academic conference exploring queer relations to the work of Andy Warhol, Davis performed her song ‘French’ whilst kissing members of the audience, before taking to the stage in order to read a narrative piece. This text, *My Favourite Dead Artist* (1999), details a conversation between Davis and Warhol at a club in Los Angeles in which Warhol fails to recognise Davis’s outfit as being inspired by Frida Kahlo. The conversational content of the text is of questionable veracity, although, crucially, plausible enough to not be dismissed as pure fiction.¹¹⁰ Siegel (who is a personal friend and collaborator of Davis) writes that after the performance

another queer Warhol scholar, rightfully praised for his impeccably detailed historical research, pulled me aside somewhat conspiratorially and asked ‘do you think it’s true?’ [...] [A]ny attempt to adjudicate the truth value of Davis’s

¹⁰⁸ Spitz and Mullen, p. xv

¹⁰⁹ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

¹¹⁰ As Siegel writes, Davis and her band the Afro Sisters were featured in the last issue of *Interview* magazine Warhol personally supervised (*Interview*, April 1986). It is therefore entirely possible that they met, although the content of their conversation is impossible to prove or verify.

gossip seems to miss what is so essential about it: it is neither true nor false; it is fabulous.¹¹¹

To Siegel it is not important whether the conversation between Warhol and Davis actually happened, whilst his colleague wanted 'a reliable truth for all occasions'.¹¹² For Siegel, Davis's 'gossip', her mythologising of her own life (whether based in fact or not) exists as an example of a

performative mode of oral discourse that produces highly resonant characters, mythic types or legendary figures whose embodied particularities are the stuff out of which others nourish their hopes and desires for ever more and varied ways of being in the world.¹¹³

Davis's fabulousness, which Siegel deploys in the colloquial manner of symbolising glamour and excess as well as its etymological relation to 'fables, myths and legends' is valorised as a useful and enlightening practice distinct from the pursuit of fact or of historical legibility.

In Jennifer Doyle's *Sex Objects*, Davis's club performances 'as' Vanessa Beecroft (the institutionally established and market-validated Italian gallery artist) provide one of the central examples of Doyle's attempt to 'track the deployment of sex, as a

¹¹¹ Marc Siegel, 'Vaginal Davis's Gospel Truths', *Camera Obscura*, 23 (2008), 151-159, (p.155).

¹¹² Siegel, p. 156.

¹¹³ Siegel, p. 156.

discursive field, inside the official, institutional production of art'.¹¹⁴ By examining the subversive appropriation of Beecroft's persona by Davis, Doyle identifies the institutional conservatism revealed by Beecroft's staging of the bodies of female students in a gallery performance (*VB46*, 2001) in relation to the commercialisation of the art market and to sex as an art world commodity. Davis's work, for Doyle, offers an alternative by imagining 'what might happen to Beecroft's installations if we staged them outside the space of Official Art'.¹¹⁵ Davis's idiosyncratic use of art world references in non-art spaces might then provide insight into how limited, in terms of gender and sexual representation, the spectacles permitted inside the art world establishment (commercial galleries and museums) are.

Here though again, Davis's unwillingness to explain her performances in any way lead to confusion and the overlooking of critique. Davis's art-world joke (her unlikely appropriation of Beecroft as a figure for the basis of a club performance) was, according to Doyle, largely lost on the audience – similarly, I would argue, to the way in which Davis's citation of Jack Smith was lost in *Memory Island*. Some of the audience thought that Davis might actually be Beecroft, or that Davis's claim whilst on stage to have been accepted into the Whitney Biennial was a claim on the part of Davis herself and not the character she was portraying. This is not to assume that either the audience at *VB46* were necessarily unfamiliar with Beecroft (or the audience at *Memory Island* with Smith), but that the references were similarly scrambled.

¹¹⁴ Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p. 122.

¹¹⁵ Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p. 137

The confusion identified by Doyle is important, for her analysis and my own. Doyle writes that Davis's practice 'orbits a series of failures in performance – the presence of boredom, the spectacle of sexual failure, and the failure of the audience to recognise Davis's drag as a parody'.¹¹⁶ As Davis herself acknowledges, these failures are often deliberate attempts to subvert the expectations of an audience, and I would extend this to her relation to critical reflection. Davis's continual reinvention and exaggeration of her own biography, artistic history, sexual relationships and other information is extremely difficult for scholars to contend with, as her unique narrative style makes it nearly impossible for anybody, whether audience member or critical writer, to say with any great degree of certainty whether Davis's claims and stories are empirically true or false. Frequently, they are somewhere between these two poles, provoking a lack of recognition among writers of the parodic or just mischievous nature of Davis's claims. They may therefore be taken at face value, or, as is perhaps more often the case, dismissed as flamboyance or as peripheral aspects of an artistic practice.

Returning to Muñoz, it is clear that his work remains one of the most significant examples of analysis devoted to Davis's work, and did much to bring elements of her performance practice to the attention of the academy and audiences (indeed, I myself may have never come across her work without his writing). Davis is clear, however, although personally close with Muñoz, that this analysis reflects only his

¹¹⁶ Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p. xxviii.

reading, and is not a conclusion that she is prepared to endorse, deny or take a position on. As she says

people are going to see it however they see it, and they're going to have their own agenda too. Even with José [Muñoz] when his [first] book came out there were things like that. [...] I don't always agree with people's interpretations of me, with how they write about me, but you know, that's how they see it. So what If I don't agree with it?¹¹⁷

This is a central problem in the incorporation of marginal polymath figures into disciplinary critical agendas, as I have previously attempted to outline in part during my analysis of David Wojnarowicz, and the difficulty of articulating his earlier work and its relationship to post-punk and the Cinema of Transgression in relation to a critical profile sometimes overdetermined by his AIDS activism. In Davis's case, it could be suggested that both Muñoz and Doyle are sometimes overly sincere in their analysis of Davis's work, and that if her silliness, irreverence and fictionalisation of her own academic legibility are a deliberate strategy to avoid analysis, then scholarship should perhaps also stage that silliness and irreverence, in the spirit of challenging the aspects of critical reflection that the artist finds problematic, such as impenetrability.

¹¹⁷ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

I don't mean to suggest here that Davis would disagree or object to either scholar's work (although, as Davis herself says, so what if she did?), but they do in part attempt to explain and rationalise Davis's trashiness and firmly ground her potential as an object of critical analysis. Muñoz explicitly acknowledges in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) that part of his relationship to Davis was a 'a reimagined modality of the patronage system', in which

She does her work, and I testify to the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* – with my academic credentials and letterhead well in place – that she is a certified art star in the tradition of Dada and Surrealism.¹¹⁸

When Doyle writes that the source materials for Davis's practice are 'sometimes so deep inside art-world institutions that many of her audience members do not recognize the citation', the converse might also need to be acknowledged: that often Davis's practice exists in places and depends on references so far removed from either the art world or widely recognisable popular culture, that they are unable to be fully reconciled with it.¹¹⁹ Specific citations of images from the class, racial and sexual politics of Los Angeles, or of the extremely specialised and idiosyncratic popular culture history that Davis regularly uses might be so far outside the usual parameters of art world citation and reference that many critical writers similarly fail to recognise it as a citation or parody. As Siegel writes in relation to Davis's Warhol story and other claims, the 'truth' of Davis's intention is not what is

¹¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2009), p. 111.

¹¹⁹ Doyle, *Sex Objects*, p. 135

important to either the artist or intended audience, and in searching for corroboration the other academic Siegel cites is searching for a truth 'verified by other (read: more trustworthy) sources'.¹²⁰ Muñoz's explanation of his ability to endorse Davis is at least in part an example of an academic providing a more trustworthy source for the 'truth' of Davis's practice than the stated intent of the artist (or the lack of stated intent).

Incorporating the Uncooperative into Critical Discourse

The difficult nature of balancing the integrity of an artist's deliberate marginality and a desire to discuss their work in a critically rigorous way is an extremely complicated prospect to resolve. I believe that Davis's work is fascinating as an object of study, but that that study is problematic if it destroys the fictive flexibility and ambiguity of her artistic production. In conducting such analysis however, I am in part attempting to legitimise her practice as significant within a critical context. Jennifer Doyle also acknowledges this problem of incorporating Davis's work into existing critical frameworks when she reflects on how *Sex Objects* was part of a process of bringing herself 'to a place where I could write about Vaginal Davis's work' within an academic context.¹²¹ I read this as referring to both the difficulties of articulating Davis's work within academic language, and the fact that Davis is a friend (of Doyle), to whom she feels a responsibility to remain sympathetic to her project of

¹²⁰ Siegel, p. 156.

¹²¹ Jennifer Doyle, 'Hold It Against Me: Difficulty, Emotion and David Wojnarowicz', unpublished lecture, presented at *Addressing and Redressing the Silence: New Scholarship in Sexuality and American Art*, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 29 January 2011, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMluukkZJ10>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

irreverence and silliness. This negotiation is a difficult one for any scholar. As

Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure*,

terms like serious and rigorous tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms to what is already known according to the approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy.¹²²

For Halberstam – citing ‘rogue intellectuals’ who by their outsider status achieve conceptual leaps that ‘often serve as the launching pad for alternatives’ – difficulty, incomprehension and failure should not necessarily be denied or undone by theorisation.¹²³ Rather than offering an avenue for institutional legitimisation to otherwise inadmissible material, objects of study who do not fit could instead provide the basis for new methods of critical engagement. I conclude this chapter by examining Davis’s idiosyncratic use of language, and a personal instance of connection to her practice (her letters to me) in order to address this possibility. If advocating for new forms of critical language in which to articulate the practices of polymath artists, Davis’s personal use of language might offer a neat counterpoint, as a unique and deeply subjective form of address that encompasses both her irreverence and the nature of her persona and the encoded political and social critique that the above examples demonstrate. The exuberant nature of Davis’s

¹²² Halberstam, p. 6.

¹²³ Halberstam, pp. 6-7.

conversational style is not just a quirk of the artist's personality to be negotiated in considering the work, but an intrinsic part of the art that Davis produces, and informed by the professed attitude towards critical analysis and institutional attention that has been the subject of this chapter.

Davis's use of language, such as her propensity to create new vocabulary and portmanteaus from already niche slang terms, is not accidental, but another example of embedded and 'decodable' critique and political positioning. By referring to herself as a 'blacktress', to a group of young artists as a 'youthquaker posse', to a penis as a 'peterfication' or 'thrombone', or to a man as a 'hungthrob' (a portmanteau of 'well hung' and 'heartthrob'), she deploys racial slang, queer idioms and an irreverent subversion of power relations.¹²⁴ The manner in which she does this is in part a way of complicating her own ability to be discussed in critical contexts at a remove from the writer. The deep subjective engagement with her language choices required relies on the writers own connection or familiarity with Davis in order to allow them to decode it.

My concluding example of this is Davis's regular and global practice of correspondence, to which I have already briefly referred. The artist cites this as being one the 'main components' of her practice, despite its negligible acknowledgment in any of the critical writing devoted to her work.¹²⁵ Davis's

¹²⁴ One of the best sources for experiencing Davis's unique vocabulary choices is her blog, *Speaking from the Diaphragm*, which offers a written version of her conversational style. <<http://blog.vaginaldavis.com>> [accessed 5 May 2016].

¹²⁵ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

correspondence reflects both her use of language as a barrier to understanding and incorporation, and an emphasis on subjective engagement with her practice that poses yet another methodological challenge for critical reflection. Davis's letters are both expressions of her artistic practice and personality and used as a tool for communication with friends, collaborators, and ex-students, many of whom (including Siegel, Muñoz, Doyle, and now me) also write and reflect on her practice in a critical context. Davis's letters resist easy transcription or reproduction, and are specifically configured as material experiences in an everyday ruled by the digital. Indeed, for Davis, to receive a letter today is an experience 'so novel and so unusual that it has a weight to it. A letter is like a little gift coming to you'.¹²⁶

Rather than viewing Davis's letter writing as a personal idiosyncrasy or affectation, I see in her letters examples of the same techniques, strategies and aesthetic employed in her performance work, her other writings, film, and visual art. Davis performs herself through her letters as she does in both conversation and her artistic work, sharing scandal and gossip from her life and rumours in the art world, inventing complicated scenarios involving celebrities, and extravagantly complaining about the climate and sexual dysfunction of whatever city she happens to be in. Each letter I receive is colourfully and uniquely decorated, on the outside of the envelope as well as in, and arrives addressed to grand Anglophilic embellishments of my name, such as 'Lord Lewis Rothschild' or 'Sir Lewis Church Esquire'.

¹²⁶ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

Inside, the envelopes contain treasure alongside the letter itself (an individual make-up painting, a ¡Cholita! sticker from the 1980s) as often as they contain ephemera of questionable utility (multiple heads of Matt Damon snipped from a newspaper, copies of expired leaflets or pornographic adverts). In terms of written content, the letters may contain simple reports of recent events or performances, gossip, remarks about the weather in Berlin, or a quasi-motivational pep-talk about what Davis ‘has heard’ about my sex life. These texts are broken up by interjections, non-sequiturs, fictional digressions and doodles, Davis herself acknowledging that her ‘letters aren’t always so linear’, that she might ‘lose my train of thought sometimes and maybe I forget if I’ve talked to you before or if you asked a question, so I don’t answer things linearly’.¹²⁷ This fragmented, ‘nonlinear’ text comes written on hotel stationary, the torn pages of books and, once, on the back of a royalty statement from Paramount Pictures.

In their construction, the letters are far from purely functional tools of communication but crafted and curated collections of words, decoration and found images. The letters which Davis sends to me and other correspondents are expressions of her practice that are tailored to one recipient, delivered as an extension of a personal interaction rather than through public sharing. Although the audience for this interaction is only one other person, it is nevertheless part of her public process of self-fashioning. As Linda S. Kauffman writes in relation to the epistolary mode, ‘[s]ince every letter writer is also a reader, epistolarity exposes the

¹²⁷ Vaginal Davis, Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2014.

internal processes of the reading subject'.¹²⁸ As such Davis's letters reveal much about her relationship to the archive, and, as with Lunch, to the indivisibility of her everyday and artistic personas.

In the act of letter writing, a method of communication made increasingly obsolete by the proliferation of email and social networking (from which David tends to refrain), Davis enacts her glorification of 'trash' and pop-culture ephemera; the handmade, the kitsch, the ramshackle and the difficult to quantify or describe. Despite Davis's claim of the centrality of the letters to her artistic practice, they are impossible to accurately archive or survey (being spread across myriad correspondents), and arguably would not have much potential as objects to publish or exhibit to the public. The letters to me, for example, which Davis has individually tailored to make me laugh, to reference in-jokes and our shared history, would make little sense to a wider audience, and might therefore have little chance of being exhibited (or sold) as artworks were Davis or I to attempt to do so.

Unlike the Fluxus-inspired mail art of the 1960s, which Seeta Peña Gangadharan describes as emphasising 'a relational aesthetic and the co-creative process of art-making in both embodied and disembodied forms', Davis's letters are not co-created or part of an outward facing collaboration, but small, self-contained pieces created for a subjective reception.¹²⁹ They are also demonstrative of her

¹²⁸ Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. xxii.

¹²⁹ Seeta Peña Gangadharan, 'Mail Art: Networking without Technology', *New Media and Society* 11 (2009) 279-298 (p. 286).

commitment to polymathy, in her framing of a broad swathe of activities that are difficult to divide from everyday action (like regular letter-writing) as being part of her artistic practice, despite their distinction from a more formally orthodox medium. Davis conceptualises this as being a 'main component' of what she does, a practice of art-making built upon one-to-one interactions and individual response, rather than a public gesture with transferable significance. Davis's letters exemplify her commitment to this personal standard of significance, a mode of production that does not attempt to fit in to conventional models of artistic marketability or public dissemination, or indeed of disciplinary canonisation. Instead Davis insists on an invested engagement with her practice, a personal reading, drawn from private experience and subjective reaction.

Using my personal experience as a correspondent of Davis in order to understand her attitude to creative practice therefore requires me to negotiate between the exaggeration and fictionalisation of Davis's performed self and our now long-standing friendship. As in the work of Doyle and Muñoz, this personal relationship has directly influenced my approach to considering Davis's practice, and provoked new thinking about the ways in which the artist's sceptical attitude towards the institutions of the art market and academy are confirmed by her sustained practice of correspondence. My correspondence and friendship with Davis has shaped and nuanced my engagement with her work, and continues to raise essential questions about the interaction of scholars and artists who profess not to care that they are ignored by the academy, journalists, and other institutions.

The difficulty of finding a critical language for subjective engagement with artworks is addressed by Doyle in *Hold It Against Me*, which discusses emotionality as a critical strategy and I have drawn on throughout this thesis. Although not referring to Davis directly, Doyle's book suggests the same problems of critical engagement faced by those attempting to discuss Davis's work. As Doyle writes

Usually the critic's mandate is to resolve difficulty when we encounter it, to write as if that difficulty doesn't exist for us, even as we produce that difficulty as a noble, productive challenge, worth confronting and working through.¹³⁰

Through a discussion of John Vincent's analysis of George Steiner's essay 'On Difficulty', Doyle asks whether it is possible to 'imagine readers who don't want closure, whose reading practices are not fuelled by a penetrative, epistemic drive, moving always towards "deeper" levels of meaning'.¹³¹ She argues that an appreciation of these kinds of reader might instead allow us to engage with artworks on their own terms, under their own criteria of success and without an overreliance on the already established models of critical reflection. As Siegel argues, with his view of the irrelevance of the truth of Davis's encounter with Warhol, for certain artists the importance of those prepared to accept and orient their reaction and reflection on an artwork through the criteria and ethos of that work should not be underestimated. Doyle also makes this point, arguing that within

¹³⁰ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. xii.

¹³¹ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. xiii.

the context of artistic scandal (including the scandal around David Wojnarowicz's work, which I discuss in Chapter 2), to 'allow our thinking to be oriented by the terms and values of controversy', underplays the significance of those who make up 'the work's core audience: the people who actively seek it out, who follow the artist's career and give themselves over to the work's processes'.¹³²

Doyle suggests that a defensive posture in relation to work dismissed or denigrated obscures the original intent of the artist and its potential as an object of artistic study. Similarly then, the tendency to 'defend' Davis's work, to endorse it within an academic context and attempt to rejig the parameters of our analysis in order to accommodate that which may otherwise be discarded by the academy or critical writers (such as arts journalists, media commentators, etc), could risk undoing some of the potential of that work to be different, to challenge and to innovate. Such a posture may, in Doyle's words fail 'because it does not give us room to acknowledge how much failure, refusal, and rejection inform the poetics of the works in question'.¹³³ What Doyle's work attempts to demonstrate is that it is possible to articulate critical conclusions as to the significance of the work in a way that does not elide the subjectivity of the writer or the desires of the artist to be engaged with on a personal level.

¹³² Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. 13

¹³³ Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, p. 13.

For Davis, her insistence on subjectivity and commitment to encoded meanings within her artistic practice suggests a similar concern. It is this that I have attempted to convey in relation to Davis's work; the essential quality of the un-incorporable to any one writer or audience member's taste and engagement. What Davis requires and pursues is an entirely personal standard of significance, a subjective negotiation of an audience member's own position, which will never fully understand all of her references, her strategies, or rationale behind decisions. Our misunderstandings of both her and her work by others, and her subsequent marginality as an artist, are an essential quality of her practice. This has been a consistent theme throughout this thesis, with both Lunch and Wojnarowicz also creating work that, whilst not entirely without potential as a subject of analysis outside of its original subcultural context, has deep and diverse contextual and historical resonances when investigated through it. The decoding and excavation of meaning in relation to work like those of my three case studies can reveal much about the ethos, strategies and imperatives of a subculture, in this case the subculture of post-punk.

Conclusion

According to Joe Corr , founder of the Agent Provocateur lingerie brand and son of punk originators Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, scholarship that examines the subcultures of punk, post-punk and its related artists is bankrupt in the context of the political situation of the late 2010s. Or, as he put it at a Museum of London debate convened as part of the anniversary *Punk.London* season, '[Donald] Trump is in, and all of your punk professorships and all your books won't do a thing about it'.¹ Corr 's belligerent appearance on the panel was part of a series of protests against the programme of events and what he perceived as its historicising nature, concluded by the burning of his personal collection of punk memorabilia (which he valued at five million pounds) as a rejection of its archival significance.

This ranting denunciation of *Punk.London* events that Corr  sees as cashing-in on the oppositional legacy of punk would have had more weight had he not been accompanied by a film crew, documenting his protest for further publicity and later commercial release as a documentary. Despite his apparent hypocrisy, the position performed by Corr  at the debate was that archival documentation and academic

¹ Joe Corr , at the *Is London Still Punk?* debate at The Museum of London, 19 November 2016. As referenced in my introduction, *Punk.London* was a series of events in the city commemorating the 40th anniversary of punk hosted by several cultural institutions, including the Museum of London. Corr 's comments about academia were prompted by the presence on the panel of Vivien Goldman, an academic, journalist, musician and broadcaster whose punk modules at New York's Tisch School of the Arts have earned her the soubriquet 'The Punk Professor'. Further details are available on Goldman's website <<http://viviengoldman.com>> [accessed 17 July 2017].

engagement with the subculture destroys everything that was potent in its rebellion against the cultural status quo of the late 1970s and 1980s. It is a somewhat exaggerated illustration of the continued anxiety amongst those who associate themselves with the subculture about maintaining its position as transgressive, politically charged and an unrepeatable instance of cultural innovation in the face of the increasing attention given to it by institutions and scholars. To Corr , scholarly analysis of the kind undertaken in this thesis accommodates the subculture and the art that emerges from it within neoliberal models of knowledge production in the contemporary university; it supports an archival impulse that may serve the market forces of the international culture industry.

Where Corr  is correct is in the charge that punk and post-punk now have an established – if not unproblematic – home within the academy and in mainstream cultural institutions. Despite his largely inherited identification with the subculture, Corr  rehearses the anxiety on the part of self-identified participants, suggesting that scholarly reflection on punk and post-punk is a practice of containment, similar in operation to that outlined in Chapter Two in relation to *A Fire in My Belly*. Corr  sees punk and post-punk’s canonisation as a dilution of its original oppositional potential and critique, an anxiety that such reflection is ‘consolidating the powers it ostensibly challenges’, as Jonathan Dollimore writes.² I am not wholly unsympathetic to this concern. As Zack Furness writes, there are

² Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 27.

completely legitimate reasons why punks should be radically skeptical about the ways their music, ideas and cultural practices are documented by representatives of institutions (colleges [and] universities) that are, by design, the antithesis of DIY'.³

However, dismissals of the kind undertaken by Corr  , on the basis that punk and post-punk are somehow inherently unsuited or inappropriate for consideration within an academic context, are problematically committed to a narrow consideration of what identification with that subculture might usefully mean. They therefore limit its historical and cultural significance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I do not agree that the ultimate outcome of my thesis – as an instance of the kind of research Corr   would disparage – is to depoliticise, neaten or smooth over the difficult, oppositional and challenging aspects of the work that I discuss. Indeed, as I argue throughout, I have sought to reaffirm the work of artists as being shaped and sustained by the concerns of the subculture to reveal problems of legibility, simplification, and oversight in existing considerations of its content, formal qualities, and context.

I do not attempt to hoodwink readers into believing that punk and post-punk subcultures are still 'a viable alternative, a solution, an alternative way of living and operating under a different set of rules and choices', as Corr   describes the project of 'bastions of the establishment' like the Museum of London, which hosted the

³ Zack Furness, 'Attempted Education and Righteous Accusations: An Introduction to Punkademics', *Punkademics: The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower*, ed. by Zack Furness (New York: Minor Compositions, 2012), pp. 5-24 (p.15).

panel.⁴ I do not suggest that the artistic strategies of punk or post-punk artists are necessarily ones that could or should be taken up by artists at this particular historical moment of the late 2010s. But I do argue that the qualities I identify within the practices of Lydia Lunch, David Wojnarowicz and Vaginal Davis suggest artistic models of innovation rooted in their political, social and cultural moment that are useful to reaffirm today. Reengagements with largely unincorporated instances of practice – those missing, underrepresented or outside of the solidified ‘notions of what went on during punk [or post-punk]’ as referenced by Roger Sabin in his articulation of the narrowness of the frame of punk reference – foster greater awareness of the blind spots in already existing analysis.⁵ This is particularly important for scholars to address as, as Furness writes, the ‘process of documentation and analysis (not to mention debate)’ undertaken by scholars and critics ‘plays a discernable role in shaping how people understand what punk is, whom it is for, and why it is important’.⁶ I therefore maintain the usefulness of continuing to consider punk and post-punk within an academic context, and to research (including my own) that attempts to broaden discussion and understanding of the subculture and the work of artists related to it.

In this thesis I have explored the practices of artists who make work across artistic mediums and forms that emerge from a post-punk context, and suggest that what I term their polymathy is related to and sustained by their participation in post-punk.

⁴ Joe Corré, ‘FAQ – The Punk London Festival’, *BurnPunkLondon*, <https://burnpunklondon.com/?page_id=411> [accessed 17 July 2017] (para 1 of 3).

⁵ Roger Sabin, ‘Introduction’, *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. by Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 2.

⁶ Furness, p. 16.

Throughout I have afforded sustained attention to (and taken seriously) aspects of artists' practice often overlooked or passed over by critics and academics as implicitly irrelevant, tangential or outside the remit of existing histories of post-punk, or of critical reflection. This has taken the form of acknowledging the importance of intertextual reference and autobiographical contingency in Lunch's practice, an emphatic reassertion of the context of post-punk in relation to Wojnarowicz, and an embrace of Davis's self-sabotage as a deliberate strategy worthy of critical attention. I have attempted to establish an alternative approach through which to engage with these artists that also reflects their often-antagonistic dismissal of academic study and sometimes awkward straddling of critical disciplines. This thesis has been a dual project of excavation and analysis, of both identifying critical blind spots and acting out an analysis that addresses them. In detailing and examining this work and the critical reflection devoted to it, I have aimed to provide concrete examples of the kinds of analysis missing from the critical profile of artists awkwardly positioned within critical discourses, both within the academy and in broader analysis of art (such as cultural journalism).

In Chapter One this took the form of attempting to articulate a wide-ranging survey of the practice of Lydia Lunch, a figure with little critical profile within the academy but whose practice, when explored as a unified array of intertextually related works reflects the particular characteristics of artistic production on the post-punk Lower East Side, and the necessity of engaging with the influence these qualities exert when assessing her work critically. Chapter One established the importance of an historical context to my artists, and to the recognition of the interrelatedness of the

artist's subcultural identification and the ways in which they produce and develop artworks. I also see this as reflecting my wider conviction throughout my research that resituating the viability and significance of these practices in relation to post-punk can allow new readings of the subculture beyond the same, now familiar examples.

In Chapter Two, I examined the practice of David Wojnarowicz, an artist with a comparatively high degree of critical attention, but one whose connection to post-punk subcultures is often lost within a characterisation of his practice driven by media controversy and political containment. If the work of Lunch demonstrates how the intentions and attitudes of the post-punk polymath artist, accentuated and confirmed by her or his environment, may provoke a certain critical marginality, the work of Wojnarowicz offers a different perspective on both how this marginality may occur and its significance. Whilst the difficulty of assimilating Lunch into critical practice stems from the careful and effective management of her own artistic profile, the limits of the critical profile of Wojnarowicz are provoked and maintained by the work of others, particularly (but not exclusively) since his death. Wojnarowicz is not around to police his own representation in the same way that Lunch does through her polemical writing, interviews and artistic decisions. His practice has been adopted and incorporated into a particular cultural role and significance, fulfilling only a particular role for most within the media and in curatorial agendas, to the presumed exasperation of the artist himself, and to later critics like Jennifer Doyle, Dennis Cooper and Sur Rodney (Sur).

In Chapter Three, I turned to the artist Vaginal Davis as an example of the ability of the post-punk polymath to successfully undermine their own inclusion in critical discourse, art markets, and other systems of artistic validation. Although this agenda is implicitly present in both Lunch and Wojnarowicz's challenge to their incorporation in institutional canons, Davis's practice is perhaps more consistent in enacting this subversion of her own work, and the rhetorical moves she uses to do so more explicit. By recasting the failure of her performance of *Memory Island* at Tate Modern as entirely in keeping with her strategies of artistic production, I explored the notion of self-sabotage in relation to her practice, and to the ways it has encouraged dismissal and occluded certain instances of critical reflection. Throughout the chapter, I also suggested that my personal connection to Davis was a motivating factor in aiming to reconsider the value of her work. I positioned the subjectivity of my engagements with her performance, zines, visual art and music as being an essential factor to consider, and explored the potential of personal identification with an artist as a critical resource.

As I refer to in my introduction, the critical positioning of artists without a defining discipline or established critical home is a wider and enduring question. But it is one particularly relevant to the increasing canonisation of post-punk, both because of the particular conditions and ideology of that subculture, and the institutional processes that now govern its inclusion in cultural histories. In fighting for a space for critically marginalised or overlooked artists, it is perhaps tempting to seek out moments of connection and clarity across already existing structures of criticism, whether in academic disciplines or the terms of an already existing socio-cultural

conversation. What is difficult when examining those artists that might reasonably be called polymaths is walking the line between accepting those connections as a useful touchstone and emphasising them at the expense of the inherent slipperiness of their practice. I aim to reclaim these artists as figures worthy of consideration or discussion, without smoothing over the parts that lend themselves less to the kinds of analyses that are already undertaken.

When I first conceived this thesis, I saw it as one more concerned with academic disciplines, and their interrelation at an institutional level, than it became as I developed the research. Whilst I have maintained elements of this core concern – of attempting to critically engage with artists whose full practices are not easily situated within a particular discipline and are limited by attempts to do so – the original question of how that related to the modern disciplinary limitations of the academy came to feel less urgent. As I suggest in my introduction, the nature of the debate around interdisciplinarity can often be a circular one, a continual proposal of new models of interaction. Instead of a focus on the development and policing of disciplines and an internal reflection on scholarly practice, the sense of the need to *enact* the kind of analysis I believe was missing from the consideration of these artists became paramount. My methodology of grounding wider points about the critical difficulty of my case studies in detailed descriptions and close analysis of what their work is and does stemmed from this new imperative. This was clearly the case with Davis, for example, whose performance of *Memory Island* provided the key to unlocking my approach to her work in my chapter. This led me to focus more on what I could bring to the discussion happening around the work of my case

studies than attempting to define where that discussion took place in disciplinary terms. My research transformed into an attempt to work through the methodological difficulties of engaging with these particularly elusive and contradictory artists.

The inaccessibility, ephemerality and underground nature of my chosen case studies was part of this methodological challenge, and often in the process of an attempted survey I happened across work I was previously unfamiliar with. The impetus to share this work, examine its potential as a subject for analysis, and connect and relate it to the limited critical reflection that had already been undertaken felt urgent and necessary. Wojnarowicz's band, 3 Teens Kill 4, for example, are never more than briefly mentioned in the critical work devoted to him, despite (as I explain in Chapter Two), the connection between Wojnarowicz's contribution to their music and his later writings. This process of discovery, of happening across new moments of connection between a single artist's range of practices, and bringing this knowledge to bear on aspects of work without a significant critical position, was both pleasurable and useful critically, in that it presented an opportunity to further the existing conversation around these artists.

Throughout the process of writing, my case studies were also the subjects of new research, magazine articles, retrospectives and occasional bursts of public interest, which both confirmed my conviction that the concerns and strategies of this work are still relevant to a contemporary moment, and also that by intervening in this conversation I am able to contribute new contexts and frameworks of

understanding to a developing critical dialogue, as post-punk becomes newly emergent as a topic of study. My work in this thesis speaks to Gavin Butt's suggestion, at the *Post-Punk Then and Now* series of events at Goldsmiths university, of articulating post-punk as an 'expanded cultural playground' where artists were able to reach 'out to other forms of art-making (performance, film, etc.) alongside their musical production, allowing 'alternative visions to be forged'.⁷

Whilst I broadly agree with Furness's charge that '[a]cademics should not be seen as *the* authoritative voices capable of explaining punk' and its cultures, an analytical and critical approach can do much to develop understandings of the practice of artists invested in the subculture, including an appreciation of the potential of their artistic production to resist the mechanics of institutional accommodation.⁸ The analytical model I have followed throughout my research, that of surveying as comprehensively as possible the broad range of an artist's practice before drawing out connections and interrelations, is one that I believe has further potential in relation to other artists and figures. Whilst within this thesis I focused on American artists, a parallel project or possible continuation of this research might be a similar examination of British artists who made work across a wide array of mediums in the post-punk era, such as Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE, Don Letts or Mark Perry.⁹

⁷ Gavin Butt, 'Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher in Conversation (2/10/14)', in *Post-Punk Then and Now*, ed. by Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher (London: Repeater, 2016), pp. 8-24 (p. 13).

⁸ Furness, p. 11.

⁹ Genesis Breyer P-Orridge is a visual artist, musician, subcultural instigator and filmmaker, both in a solo capacity and with a wide array of collaborators. Don Letts is a writer, filmmaker, DJ and musician who documented much of the early punk scene before forming the band Big Audio Dynamite with Mick Jones in 1984. Mark Perry produced the now legendary fanzine *Sniffin' Glue* and co-founded the influential punk band Alternative TV. All three maintain diverse practices,

However, my goal within this thesis has not been an attempt to survey all those who might be referred to as a post-punk polymath. In the US, there were other figures that might have also been the subject of their own case studies, including some I reference, such as Kembra Pfahler, or other polymathic figures working in the same context, such as Alan Vega or John Lurie. I decided, however, that my primary goal of engaging with the work of my case studies in a deep and sustained manner was better served by spending more time with fewer case studies, especially in the context of my argument that the connection between their position in the post-punk scene and a polymathic practice is rarely considered in a sustained fashion. These other examples, and the potential of a similar project of connection and survey in other geographical and historical contexts, points to further applications of my research, and potential continuations.

I conclude with an observation on tone, building on Dick Hebdige's suggestion in his conclusion to *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, that it is 'highly unlikely that the members of any of the subcultures described in this book would recognise themselves reflected here'.¹⁰ I read this as referring to the lack of a sense of the voice of the subjects of Hebdige's analysis, their motivations and concerns, and the way that they view their own subcultural project, which is largely sublimated in favour of the author's own observations about their interaction. I believe that it is, in part, this sense of a lack of participant's own voices that engenders the opposition of figures like Corr  . Unlike Hebdige, I hope that my own subjects of analysis, Lydia

are highly influential figures in the British post-punk scene, and have had comparatively little attention paid to the diversity of their practices in a critical context.

¹⁰ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 139.

Lunch, David Wojnarowicz and Vaginal Davis, would recognise the importance of their voices throughout my thesis. I use their own reflections to position my own analytical approach to their work, in relation to the concerns that motivate their artistic strategies. I have attempted to remain invested in explaining artists' work through *their* histories and subcultural identifications, embracing the difficulty and occasional contradictions of doing so. As Jennifer Doyle writes in relation to art controversy, this forms part of a project that involves 'using *its* terms to understand the nature of its intervention'.¹¹ In Chapter Three I proposed that academic reflection engaged with an irreverent, iconoclastic artist like Davis should perhaps aspire to similar qualities as well, and throughout I have used close description and attention to the particular qualities of the voice of my case studies (their personalities and the *feel* of their work) to achieve this. Whilst seeking to remain academically rigorous, the pleasure of the transgressive and confrontational attitude of my case studies has been important for me to maintain in order to avoid the kind of tonal flattening suggested by Hebdige.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to convey a sense of the potential of post-punk as a critical lens through which to position the work of the artists I discuss, and the pleasures and potentials of considering post-punk as a context which generates or sustains artists invested in polymathy. Simon Reynolds suggests that there is 'a value to the quickening of the mind produced by movements like post-punk. The

¹¹ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 13. Emphasis in original.

sheer argumentativeness of the culture. The sense of purpose'.¹² The 'argumentativeness' of my case-studies, their determination to ground their practices in particular moments, and to speak to particular contexts and audiences in a different way requires extensive balancing of a fidelity to their wishes as producer of art and to my own responsibilities as a scholar. This balance has been one I have attempted to find within this thesis. Doing so signals to me the attraction of studying the subcultural within the frameworks of an academic institution, and the particular challenge of considering the post-punk polymath.

¹² Simon Reynolds, *Totally Wired: Post Punk Interviews and Overviews* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 432.

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